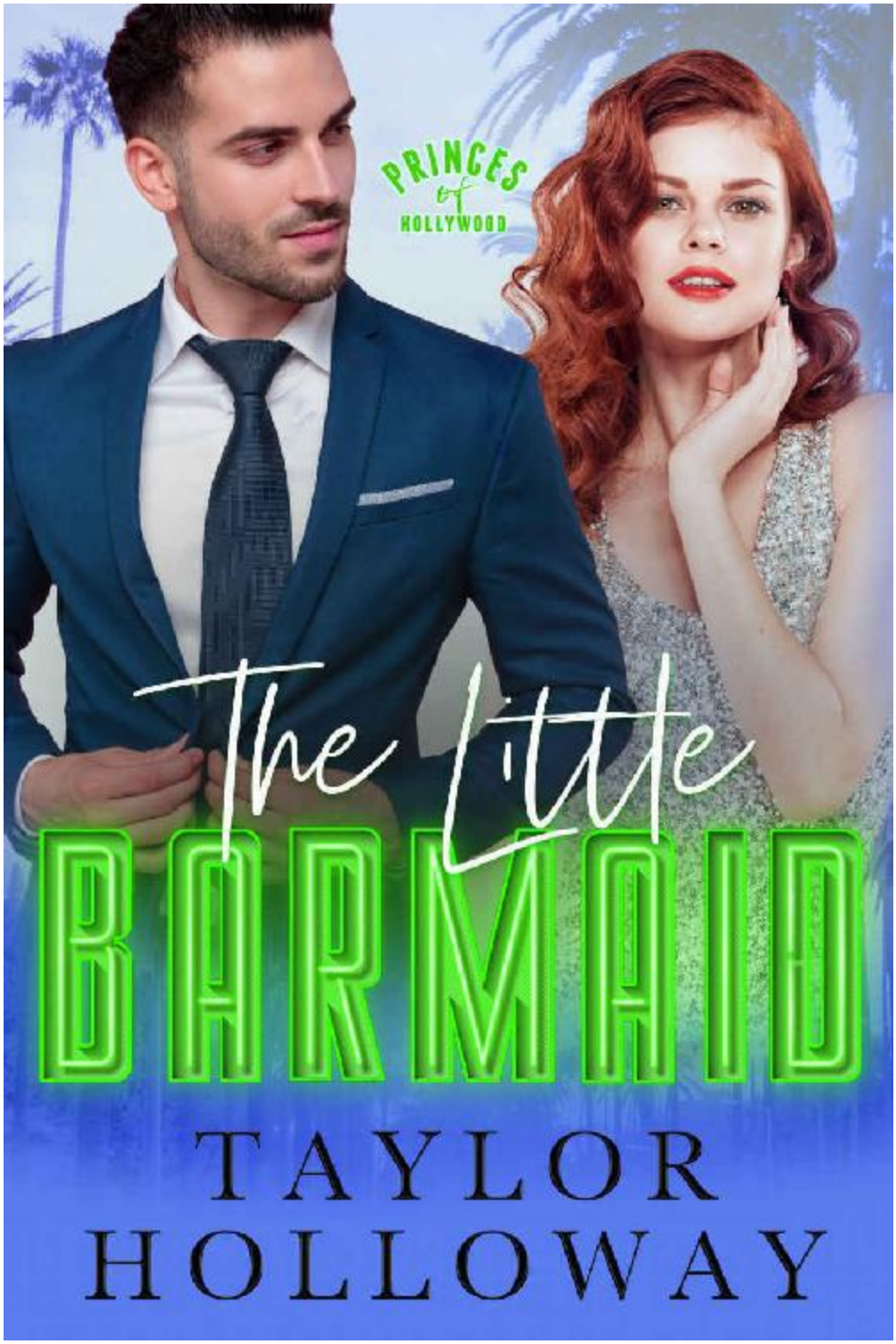
TAYLOR HOLLOWAY

ROMANCE



THE LITTLE BARMAID

TAYLOR HOLLOWAY

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CONTENTS

About This Book

1. Ariel

2. Ariel

3. Derek

4. Ariel

5. Derek

6. Ariel

7. Ariel

8. Derek

9. Ariel

10. Derek

11. Ariel

12. Derek

13. Derek
14. Ariel
15. Derek
16. Ariel
17. Derek
18. Derek
19. Ariel
20. Derek
21. Derek
22. Derek
23. Ariel
24. Ariel
25. Ariel
26. Derek
27. Derek
28. Ariel
29. Derek
30. Derek
31. Ariel
32. Derek

33. Ariel

34. Derek

35. Ariel

36. Ariel

37. Derek

38. Ariel

39. Derek

40. Derek

41. Derek

42. Derek

43. Derek

44. Ariel

45. Derek

46. Derek

47. Derek

48. Ariel

49. Ariel

50. Derek

51. Ariel

Epilogue

[Let Down Your Hair]

[Admit You Want Me]

[How to get your FREE extended epilogues!]

[Also by Taylor Holloway]

Derek Prince is a quadruple threat.

He can sing, dance, act, and charm the panties off me without breaking a sweat.

I always wanted to meet my teenage celebrity crush.

And now I’m in his new movie, shaking my sequined-covered butt right in front of him.

Instead of serving cocktails in a karaoke joint, this broke little barmaid is finally moving up in the

world.

I’ve been cast as a chorus girl in Derek’s new movie, and I even thinks he likes me, but there’s a

massive catch.

His jealous costar wants him for herself.

In exchange for a shot at my dream, I promised her I’d stay away from him.

But Derek’s relentless pursuit of me is creating all sorts of new dreams.

Steamy, forbidden ones.

After always wanting to be part of his world, he wants to be a part of mine.

I want to say yes, but the stakes are sky high.

My dream, this movie, and his career could be on the line.

Not to mention my heart...

‘The Little Barmaid’ is a sweet and sexy romcom featuring a cocky movie star hero and a

stubborn, sassy heroine on a crazy road to happily ever after. It stands alone with no cheating,

cliffhangers, or nonsense.

1

ARIEL

THE FIRST TIME I saw my uncle Sebastian’s LA karaoke bar, I knew it was my destiny. One day I

would sing on that twinkling, beaded curtain-backed stage to rapturous applause. I’d been all of seven

years old, so I hadn’t necessarily thought I’d work there as a cocktail waitress for nearly minimum

wage or live above it in a tiny studio apartment, but I’d been totally entranced by it. I still was.

The space was special. Although the club’s heyday was probably around 1977, long before it was

a karaoke dive, the shine hadn’t quite rubbed off yet. Even in the third decade of the twenty-first

century, Sebastian’s resonated with the music and excitement of the golden age of rock records. From

the signed electric guitars on the walls, to the photos of the rock gods and A-list actors of the day, to

the more bizarre memorabilia (Sebastian had a signed pair of Jack Nicholson’s shoes and Prince’s

lipstick case), it was easy to believe that the whole building had absorbed *something* special. It was

magic.

“Excuse me,” a random woman said, coming up to me as I was delivering a round of drinks. “The

ladies’ room toilets are all stopped up.”

The bathrooms, however, were only magical in the sense that they were cursed. They were just

plain old nasty and got nastier every day. No matter how much I cleaned them or how many times we

had a plumber out to repair them, they remained inexplicably disgusting.

“I’ll, um, I’ll go check on it,” I muttered apologetically. I had to plunge the damn things at least

twice a night when we were busy. “I’m so sorry. There’s another bathroom next to the office down the

hall.”

She smiled at me, looking relieved. “Great, thanks!”

Oh, and the roof leaked when it rained, and a family of squirrels was marking its sixtieth

generation in the attic that now belonged to them. But all of that was beside the point. Sebastian’s was

magical.

Although Sebastian’s was no longer the number one place where up-and-comers by the dozen

came with all their dreams of being discovered, or where A-list actors came to meet with producers

in relative privacy, it was still an LA institution. Thanks to a recent stint on a reality TV show,

Sebastian’s was even experiencing a small, second renaissance. The only downside of the bar being

busy again was that it meant I had less free time to sing on stage and more tables to bus.

It was on one of those busy, crazy nights when it seemed like everyone was absurdly thirsty, that

my day finally arrived.

“Hey Ariel,” my uncle said as I was picking up a round of drinks at the bar, “I heard from one of

my old studio contacts that a few VIP’s are stopping by tonight.”

I blinked at him in disbelief. “What?”

I must have heard him wrong.

“They’re casting for a movie musical. You should go put your name in the old karaoke machine to

sing in front of them.”

My mouth dropped open. I probably looked like a big mouth bass. “Really?”

Sebastian grinned at me and winked. With his slicked back black hair and goatee, my uncle

always resembled a very friendly and charming devil. His penchant for wearing a red velvet smoking

jacket at all times only augmented this appearance. “I told you it would happen eventually.”

He had, but I’d been waiting for almost a year for something, anything, related to a career break; I

hadn’t expected it to be tonight.

“Who’s coming?” I stuttered, suddenly running through all the songs I knew well and could use as

an impromptu audition. I knew a lot of songs…

“I’m not sure exactly,” Sebastian answered, fiddling with his single, gold hoop earring and

regarding me seriously. “Roscoe didn’t say. But I do know that they’ll be here at nine.”

Roscoe, whoever he was, might’ve given me a bit more lead time. I glanced down at my watch. It

was eight fifty-five.

Crap. I swallowed. Definitely not enough time to do my hair and makeup.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” I squeaked, running my hands down my shirt nervously. I didn’t

detect any obvious stains or tears.

Sebastian shook his head apologetically. “I’m sorry, I just found out. Don’t worry. You look fine.”

I hadn’t even straightened my hair tonight. It was piled atop my head in a big, ginger mop and tied

with a blue ribbon. My clothes were dark, boring, and meant for work, not performing. My nails were

typically bitten-down and hideous.

“I look like a poodle with under-eye circles,” I groused.

“You look beautiful,” he promised me comfortingly. “Don’t be scared. You’ve got this.”

I definitely didn’t *have this*. My nerves were suddenly off the charts. In ten seconds flat I’d gone

from annoyed about the need to plunge the ladies’ room toilet to terrified of blowing my one chance to

sing in front of someone influential.

“What should I sing?” I asked, hoping that whoever had tipped off Sebastian had given him some

details that would help me. My voice was uneven, and it felt like there was a softball lodged in my

throat.

“It’s a live action movie musical,” Sebastian said, “so maybe break out your Frozen song?”

I nodded. Good idea. ‘Let it Go’ was always a showstopper. Not too many people could nail that

high E flat like it was nothing. But high notes were my thing. I’d been practicing this particular song

for long enough that I could spit out high E flats like they were middle C’s. I could even belt out high

C’s if I needed to.

He reached out to pat my hand, which was trembling slightly. “They’re here,” he said, nodding

toward the entrance. I didn’t dare look behind myself. It would only make me more nervous to look at

them right now. “Quick, go get up there. I’ll watch your tables,” Sebastian said, shooing me off.

I rushed off behind the stage, rearranging the paying customers’ songs so I could go next. They’d

forgive me when I was a giant star.

I couldn’t believe this was finally happening. Over the past four years I’d been attending UCLA

and working at the bar part-time. Since obtaining my BFA, I'd just been spinning my wheels, attending

audition after audition and going nowhere. I wanted to sing, dance, and act for a living, but there are

an awful lot of other talented people who want the same thing. And it turns out that performing arts

degrees are not the most marketable when it comes to finding a 'real job' to tide me over. But now,

finally, I had a real opportunity.

My heart was thumping urgently in my chest, pounding on my ribs like a xylophone. I peeked out

from behind the curtain. And then I nearly fainted. Derek Prince, the star of all my teenage fantasies,

was sitting in the audience and looking bored.

Screw the Hollywood big wigs. I was going to sing for Derek Prince. He was so talented that he

made Neil Patrick Harris and Hugh Jackman look like they belonged in the chorus line, and so sexy

that he replaced Chris Hemsworth as my Hollywood crush. As part of the Prince family, literally the

reigning dynasty of Hollywood fame and fortune, Derek Prince had it all going for him. He was one O

away from EGOTs. And I'd been crushing on him for nearly six years.

I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and counted backward to settle my nerves as the old karaoke

machine spun up the right recording. The guy in front of me was busy belting out the last few bars of

the Garth Brooks' classic, 'Friends in Low Places.' He was a tenor. It didn't really work. I tried not

focus on the sour notes.

Ten.

I could do this. I'd performed harder material in front of harder audiences. In high school I had to

play King Lear in an all-girls production. There had been a fake beard and robe involved. It was a

good role, but obviously there is nothing easier for a seventeen-year-old girl than dressing up as a

seventy-year old man in front of all her friends.

Nine.

No matter what, at least I wasn't plunging a toilet right now. Usually it overflowed too. This is

what I wanted to do with my life, not manual labor. Definitely not routine toilet maintenance. Ever

since I was a child, I'd dreamed of performing.

Eight.

And I was pretty good at it. I'd been dancing since age six, taking singing lessons since age ten,

and reading music since twelve. I could tap dance, I could go up on pointe and pirouette like a boss,

and I could even do the splits while singing.

Seven.

The applause was what made it all worth it. Even if it was just the eight or nine regulars clapping

for me on a slow Tuesday night, applause was a drug for me. Ever since my first ballet rehearsal in

kindergarten, I'd been living for the applause.

Six.

My parents wanted me to go to law or medical school. In my father's family, those were the two

acceptable career paths. But I was living out here, pretending to be studying for the LSAT, because it

was my dream. I wasn't going to give up my dream just because my parents thought it was silly,

frivolous, and unlikely to support me.

Five.

Besides, I really needed this to pan out for me soon. I was barely scraping by on my tips. Working

at the karaoke bar was great, but it was barely feeding me.

Four.

If I didn't get this job, I might have to move back to Sacramento soon. I'd find myself enrolled in

Stanford Law whether I liked it or not. My parents would win by sheer economics, because I

wouldn’t be able to afford idealism anymore. I had to make this work.

Three.

And the right people were out there right now. Hopefully. Maybe one of them would see me and

think, sure, let’s give this girl a try. That’s all I wanted, a try. A chance. If I just got a chance, I knew I

could prove myself.

Two.

And Derek Prince was out there. He had the grace of Gene Kelly, the low baritone of Bing

Crosby, and the granite hard jawline of Robert Pattinson. My knees felt weak. Would he like my

voice? Would he even look up?

One.

I could do this. I was going to do this. I stepped out on stage as the first few notes filled the air. I

smiled at the audience. Derek Prince was gone. I swallowed my disappointment. The show must go

on.

2

ARIEL

I NAILED THE SONG. The crowd gave me a standing ovation and it scratched that deep itch for

validation that was always gnawing at me. I soaked in the praise and then I went to clean the

bathroom. Unfortunately, the show must go on in more ways than one. Sebastian's had a big

bachelorette party coming in soon and those ladies always consumed a lot of liquids. The bathrooms

needed to be functioning, and that was my job.

Derek Prince didn't hear me sing. I really shouldn't be disappointed; it wasn't like he cared about

who I was, but it still made me feel vaguely frustrated. I'd daydreamed about the man since I first saw

one of his Broadway shows when I was fifteen, but there was nothing to be done. I'd performed well.

And now, I was cleaning a bathroom well. I was a woman of many talents and it would eventually

pan out.

I hoped.

When I emerged, triumphant and with plunger in hand, Ursula Jones was waiting in the hallway. I

recognized her instantly.

Crap.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I stuttered at the movie star. "The bathrooms are fixed now."

"Actually," she told me, "I was wondering if I could have a word with you. You're Ariel Cross,

aren’t you?”

I nodded my head, hoping I wasn’t in trouble. I thought through the last fifteen or twenty minutes. I

didn’t think I’d done anything to deserve a complaint. “Yes.”

An A-list movie star knew my name? I could barely believe it.

“Do you have a second?” She was staring at me interestedly.

I blinked at her, hoping that I wasn’t hallucinating. Was this how big breaks got had for struggling

ingenues like me? I didn’t really know. This felt unusual though. “Sure.”

“In private?” she asked, looking around like she was concerned about being overheard.

I nodded uncertainly. “Oh, um, we can go to my uncle’s office to talk. It’s quieter back there.” I

led her back two doors down.

What was happening?

I committed myself to just going with it.

Ursula waltzed into my uncle’s office and set up shop behind his big, metal desk. I sat down in

front of it in the very uncomfortable wooden chair, totally confused. She had me at a huge

disadvantage, and not only because she took the position of power in this conversation. She knew

what was going on. I definitely didn’t. I crossed my legs nervously.

“You have a very beautiful singing voice,” Ursula told me, perhaps interpreting my utterly

confused expression, “and I want it for my next film.”

She was staring at me evenly. I stared back, nonplussed.

She wanted what?

How?

Ursula didn’t blink much. She had played an urbane, glamorous, remorseless vampire in the only

film I’d ever seen her in. She’d since bleached her dark hair a platinum blonde. She still kind of

looked like a vampire to me though. She was very beautiful, stunning even, with an oval face, large

eyes, and a pointy little nose. Yet her high forehead and widow’s peak, coupled with her wide mouth

and highly arched brows, suggested something vaguely threatening, especially with the look she was

leveling at me now. Her eyes were a piercing dark blue.

“You want… what exactly?” I stammered. How would she get my voice? Did that mean she

wanted to cast me in something? Or was she going to rip out my throat? I reminded myself she wasn’t

really a vampire.

“I’m about to start filming a musical,” she explained, smiling at me in a way that felt fake. “I’ll be

opposite Derek Prince, who I'm sure you know can sing the birds down from the trees. He's the king

of Musical Theater. But I have a gigantic problem. I'm not satisfied with my voice, and it's just not

right for the role. But my agent was very clever when she negotiated this deal for me. She made sure

that I would be able to do 100% of my vocals in the studio. I've got an idea that I want to discuss

with you."

"Oh?" I still didn't know what she was getting at, but it's not exactly every day that a movie star

sits me down and chats with me.

"Yes, I just had the most wonderful idea while you were singing." More fake smiles. More shiny,

white teeth (not pointy though). "I can easily do the dancing and the acting in the film, but I've got to

find a solution to the problem of my voice. And I think you're the perfect solution to that problem."

"You want me to record your vocals?" I asked. "Like through voiceover work in a studio?"

She nodded, grinning. "Exactly like that. Your voice and my face, acting, and dancing. We're a

combined triple threat."

I'd never done professional voice work, but I knew perfectly well that a foot in the door was

something that I badly needed. Plenty of popular actors started out doing voice work, and I knew it

was a viable career path. Although I would have preferred someone to offer me a starring role in

something, being someone's singing voice was a solid second choice. I mean, it's not like I had a ton

of choices, period. I had to take what I could get.

"That sounds good," I managed to say, jumping for joy inside.

I was—maybe—going to be in a movie!

"There's a catch though," Ursula told me. "You won't be credited, and you can't tell anyone—not

anyone—that you're the real voice. I'll be the one that gets the credit for your voice. But I will make

it up to you. You'll get cast as a chorus girl in the film so I've got you around. Plus, that will let you

get your hours to join the Screen Actors Guild and give you a credit to start working on your own. I'll

also pay you really well."

I felt my mouth fall open in shock. I wouldn't get the credit for my work on the film?

"I'd be a chorus girl?" I asked, thinking that wasn't the worst thing in the world. At least I'd be in

the movie. "But no one would know I was doing your singing?"

"That's right," Ursula said. "You'd need to pass the dance audition tomorrow, but you have a

degree in dance, don’t you? Your uncle said you did.”

I nodded. “Yes.” I paused. “Well, musical theater. Singing and dancing.”

“Really,” Ursula was continuing (I don’t think she was listening to me), “this is a good deal for

you. You’ll get to appear in a major film. And you’re going to be getting good experience and being

paid real money.” Ursula grinned. “This all should be easy for you. You’ll get two paychecks and be

in a film. So, what do you say? Do you want to be my secret voice on this production?”

I didn’t know much about Hollywood voice work. I didn’t know much about Hollywood period.

My uncle, while influential and well-connected, was much bigger in rock circles than he was in film

ones. But this sounded real. And exciting. Plus, Derek Prince would be on the film.

“I—I don’t know,” I managed to say. “I’m definitely interested though. I would like to know more

about how this would work.”

Ursula smiled warmly. “Of course, you do. I’ll have my lawyer reach out to you right away. We’re

going to need you in the studio as soon as possible. Since this will all be a big secret, you’ll have to

sign some paperwork that’s not exactly standard. But it’ll be worth it for both of us. I promise.”

She got up and prepared to breeze out then, leaving me frozen and confused. Then she paused. All

the color and warmth drained out of her. Her eyes fixed on mine, leaving me cold. I sank into my

chair.

“You can never, ever tell anyone about this,” she said to me. Her tone was icy. “I’m offering you

more than anyone ever gets offered in Hollywood. But you must keep your mouth shut unless I’m

telling you to sing. Forever. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

Ursula’s good humor returned in a rush, but now it felt forced and false. I wondered which of the

two versions of the woman I’d just seen was real. “Great!” she said, grinning at me eagerly. “I’ll send

over all the paperwork right away.”

I needed to get out of here for a few minutes. My brain was too full.

3

DEREK

AT WHAT POINT does a costar’s flirting constitute a hostile work environment? Because I was afraid I

was going to develop PTSD from my time around Ursula Jones.

“We should go get a drink after this,” Ursula had said to me inside the bar, batting her eyes and

leaning into me suggestively. We'd just arrived, and I was already uncomfortable. This was

ostensibly meant to be a chance for the casting folks to scope background talent, but it felt far too

close to a date with the way Ursula was all over me.

"I'm exhausted," I told her, gently disentangling her hand from mine under the table. "I think I just

need some rest."

"We could always Netflix and chill at your place if you want to get away from the crowd," she

suggested. Her voice in my ear was a sweet, eager whisper.

"I think I have a call coming up that I forgot about," I said to the entire table. "Excuse me for a

moment."

Fifteen minutes later and my fake call had turned into a thousand-yard stare outside Sebastian's.

Ursula Jones, my potential future costar, had a huge, obvious, sexually aggressive crush on me.

While she was pretty enough, the feeling was not at all mutual. Ursula—a hungry, rising Hollywood

starlet with an ego the size of a whale—was very much not my type. She was mean to her assistant,

short with anyone who wasn't telling her what she wanted to hear, and clearly couldn't take a hint.

So, when I stepped outside to take a break from her constant, inexplicable come-ons, I wished I could

just slip out into the night and disappear. The day had been incredibly long.

It was a shame too, because I'd been curious about Sebastian's. Since learning about it as the

part-time hangout of my brother's girlfriend Cindy, I'd done some research on the bar. It used to be a

huge deal back in the seventies and early eighties. All the big music acts used to frequent it back when

it was a rock club. And its proprietor, Sebastian Cross, was something of a legend as well.

Apparently, he'd been a key source of new acts and talents. But instead of looking at all the cool stuff

on the wall and listening to karaoke, I was sulking outside.

And sulking was definitely the right word. Today had been annoying and long. Ursula and I were

both being courted by the studio to star in a movie musical directed by one of my brother, but instead

of having the opportunity to actually sing with Ursula and see if we had much chemistry, she'd

insisted that all her vocals would be done in the studio. She'd spent most of the day flirting with me

instead, although I had to admit her dancing was excellent.

"This is the one," my agent had promised me. "The surge in new movie musicals is going to be

your ticket to EGOTs, and this one is the cream of the crop. You're getting to play the Cary Grant role

here, and Ursula will be Mae West. You're a perfect couple. It's a match made in movie history."

The musical was an adaptation of 1933's 'She Done Him Wrong,' one of Cary Grant's first major

films, and one of Mae West's best-known ones. It was a great story, dramatic and explosive. The

musical numbers were big, bright, and exciting. And to top it all off, it was all done in period

costumes.

It had to be enough. I needed this film to work. I was one Oscar away from achieving my EGOT

goals, and my damn brother had just beaten me to an Oscar. I knew that the original song from this

musical would probably push me over the edge. Plus, the script and the music were simply amazing.

It had taken more than a year for me to find my next project, and now that I finally had, I was eager to

get started. That is, if Ursula could actually do her part.

"I'm concerned that we still haven't heard Ursula sing," I'd told my brother Holden this

afternoon.

"Well, she's sending in her audition tape any day," he'd replied. "So, I wouldn't get concerned

just yet. Her agent assures us that she's excellent. Apparently, she's just so much of a perfectionist that

she's not comfortable singing live."

"You don't think it's weird she won't sing live though? Not even just with me?"

He'd shrugged her shoulders. "I think Hollywood stars have always been weird and are getting

weirder ever year. As long as she sounds good on the tape, we're good. It's not like you're singing

live in the movie. Maybe she's just shy."

Ursula did not seem shy. She seemed the opposite of shy. I still thought it was weird. Especially

when she seemed so game to dance and act through the romance scenes with me at our table read.

In the fading light of the evening, I was so distracted by my own thoughts that I failed to notice the

bachelorette party pulling up in front of me. By the time I realized what was happening, a group of ten

women had appeared around me and began approaching from every angle. I was surrounded.

"Oh my God!" A woman with a pink 'maid of honor' sash squealed. "You're Derek Prince!"

This must be how a deer feels when the wolves close in, I thought distantly. *They look hungry.*

"I love you!" One woman screamed almost directly in my ear.

“Will you come inside and dance with me?” Another screeched, grabbing for my hand to draw me

inside.

At the same time, a different woman grabbed the other hand. “Want to sing a duet?” she crooned. I

was now being pulled, literally, in two different directions. Given that both my arms were currently

occupied, another woman stepped up directly in front of me and angled my head down to look at her. I

flinched at the personal contact.

“We’re going to a strip club later, want to come?” she winked at me.

They were all talking at once. And they were all very, very drunk despite the fact that it was early

in the evening.

“Wow ladies,” I stuttered, attempting to back out of the situation. I pulled my arms out of theirs

and tried to get some space around myself. They were seriously in my bubble. “I’m flattered, but if

you could just give me a little room—”

My requests fell on deaf ears. This situation was a disaster. The entire bachelorette party had

phones in their hands--that is, unless their hands were on me. There were way too many unwelcome

hands on me, and they were wandering. My claustrophobia spiked. There had been a time in my

career when I would have gone with this situation no matter where it led, but that time was past. All I

wanted at the moment was a chance to catch my breath.

“Excuse me—” I tried again.

“You should come inside with us!” The bride insisted. “My future husband wouldn’t mind me

making an exception to our vows for you!”

“You’re so handsome!”

“I’ve seen all your movies.”

“You’re my favorite actor.”

I like female attention. Don’t get me wrong. *I like it a lot*. Find me an actor or red-blooded man

that doesn’t like gobs of feminine attention, and I’ll happily get a picture with said unicorn. But being

surrounded by ten highly excited, handsy, aggressive, drunk women is more sexual assault than sexual

gratification, especially after experiencing the small-scale version of this encounter with Ursula all

afternoon. I needed to get out of this situation, and fast.

When I saw a vintage Volkswagen beetle convertible driving by at only a few miles per hour, I

thought I was saved. The choreographer of the production, Mia, drove a bright yellow one. She must

have seen me being mobbed and decided to come bail me out. Bless her. She was just in time. The

women were working on the buttons of my shirt and two had already been plucked off by their prying

fingers.

“Sorry ladies,” I said, pulling away and darting to the curb. “I’m afraid I’ve got to go.”

I dove into the passenger seat. In a move that would put my action-movie dominating brother Peter

to shame, I smoothly managed to shove my six-foot-two body over the door and down into the bucket

seat.

“Go!” I yelled. “Quick!”

The beautiful redheaded woman sitting in the driver’s seat *was not* Mia . She immediately started

to scream. At the same time, she stomped on the gas and we shot forward into traffic. First, we

smacked a curb. Then, she twisted the wheel the other way and nearly sent us into the broadside of a

bus until she pulled back and zipped across traffic. Finally, and still screaming, she boarded a

highway on-ramp in a panic.

4

ARIEL

WHEN THE MAN jumped into my car out of nowhere, I screamed and almost killed us both. I was still

screaming thirty seconds later. He scared the ever-living shit out of me. After the bizarre offer I'd just

received from Ursula Jones in the karaoke bar, I was hardly able to think. And now this. Instant

passenger.

My squeals cut off into a single, high pitched note. There was that high C. Beautiful.

"What the fuck?" I screamed at the intruder. Better articulation of my shock and fear was not

possible at the moment. I was unable to think or drive effectively. I screamed at him again. Maybe if I

screamed loudly enough, he'd vanish back to wherever he came from. "What the fuck? What the fuck?

What the fuck?"

"Sorry! Can you please pull over?" the stranger asked me. His voice was infuriatingly mild like

he was shocked at my reaction to his sudden appearance in my passenger seat.

I swerved, pulling through multiple lanes of insane LA traffic and listening to the chorus of honks.

A semi slammed its ear-splitting horn, nearly deafening me. We were on a six-lane highway with no

shoulder. Pulling over was not an option. A bunch of people flipped me off and I waved them off. *I*

had an issue here!

“Pull over!” the man insisted.

“Don’t tell me how to drive!” I screeched. “Get out!”

The only thing louder than the angry reactions of the other drivers was my heartbeat rushing blood

through my veins. My adrenaline was at a new level. I hadn’t known it could go this high.

“I’m not jumping out of a moving vehicle onto a freeway!” he protested.

“Why not?” I taunted, trying to get somewhere I could dump his crazy ass off. Preferably a nice

public place. Like a police station. “You were perfectly happy to jump into one!”

“I thought you were someone else,” the man said.

I twisted the wheel again, trying desperately to get us off the highway. Another barrage of angry

horns and middle fingers ensued when no one wanted to let me over. Dammit.

“You know somebody that likes it when you hop into their car? Are you insane?”

He laughed. *Laughed*! “Says the woman driving like a maniac!”

I glared at the road. I couldn’t look at him or we’d both bite it. I was going to get us off this

highway if it killed me. Which it might. I turned on my blinker and prepared for another attempt.

“This is not my fault,” I grated out. “Nobody made you hop in my car like a psychopath. We’re

going to the police station where you’re gonna’ get arrested.”

“Please just pull over,” he entreated. “I swear I’ll get out immediately. Anything to get away from

your bad driving.”

“Excuse me?” Finally, I had the opportunity to exit. I took it at five times the normal speed,

slammed on the brakes, and drifted around the corner into an alleyway. I brought us to a stop, panting.

“Do you want to repeat how this is all my fault?”

“Sorry! Sorry!” the stranger was saying, looking incredibly uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean to

scare you or be rude. Really. I needed a rescue and thought you were someone else.”

I turned to stare at him.

I gaped.

It was Derek Prince. There was a movie star sitting in my passenger seat.

When I stopped arguing and started staring, Derek seemed to relax a bit. He held both hands out in

front of himself like I was a wild animal. At the moment, I felt like one. As the moment lengthened

and the silence stretched, he slowly lowered his hands.

“What the fuck? Why are you in my car?” I breathed. My voice was raspy now that I wasn’t

screaming my lungs out.

“I’m so sorry,” he said again, drawing a hand through his mussed hair uncomfortably. “Really. I

didn’t mean to scare you. I was being mobbed by those women…”

He gestured at his shirt, which had two buttons pulled off of it. It took me a moment to process

what I was seeing. Other than a tousled, sexy Derek Prince that is. I gulped in a mouthful of air,

distantly realizing that I’d been holding my breath.

“Wait. The bachelorette party did that to you?” I stuttered.

He nodded. “Are you with them?” For a moment, he looked concerned that he’d just jumped out of

the frying pan and into the fire. He’d be right, except I was much too starstruck to put the moves on

him. If I had moves. Which I didn’t. I might be able to dance but I have all the savoir faire of a kitchen

trivet. I could no more seduce Derek Prince than I could fly.

I shook my head at his absurd question. “No.” I laughed. “Definitely not. I just work at

Sebastian’s. I’m a waitress there. I’m Ariel Cross by the way.”

I extended a hand formally and he shook it, sending a little thrill through my body.

“Derek Prince.”

As if I didn’t know exactly who he was. I used to have a poster of him hung over my bed. I’d

daydream about meeting him and now I was meeting him. I’d daydreamed about other things too, lying

in my bed and staring up at his poster, but that was neither here nor there…

“I heard we had a bachelorette party coming.” I told Derek, basically babbling. I couldn’t seem to

stop myself. “We have to book those parties early because they tend to get a bit rowdy and we can

only accommodate one at a time.”

“They were definitely rowdy,” he said, shaking his head and looking vaguely ill. “They weren’t

even in the door yet.”

“So, you jumped into my car to escape them like you’re James Bond.”

He laughed. “Was it that good?” His tone was teasing. “Why thank you.”

I couldn’t stop my hysterical giggle. “I’m not sure. I was too busy screaming. It might have been

more of an Austin Powers moment and I just didn’t realize it.”

My brain was slowly, *very slowly*, catching up to this situation. Derek probably thought I was a

dolt. My heart felt like it was in my throat, not because I was still scared—that was wearing off—but

because I was sitting in the car with *Derek Prince*.

“Oh. Well, yes,” he was saying in that low, lovely voice of his, “they sort of mobbed me, you see.

I was looking to get away from them and I saw your car and it’s the same model that my friend Mia

drives, and I thought you were her coming to rescue me. I knew I needed to get out of that situation

fast and I guess I should have checked to see if it was really her before I jumped in.” He trailed off,

staring at me. “What?” he asked.

I shook my head at him. “I’m just trying to process all of this. It’s not every day a movie star

jumps into my car to escape a flash mob of thirsty women. Or anyone.”

Who jumps into moving cars at all? Also, how the heck did he even manage it? My car is tiny. I’m

only five-three and I wasn’t sure I could jump into it that gracefully. I shook my head in bemused

disbelief.

Derek was grinning at me. I stared warily back at him. God, that smile. That smile could convince

me of anything.

“*So, you have heard of me*.” For whatever reason, I got the feeling that he was surprised and

pleased to hear that. Ridiculous. Totally and completely ridiculous.

I laughed, unable to stop myself over the absurdity of this entire situation. “Of course, I’ve heard

of you," I told him. "Everybody's heard of you and your family. That's why you got assaulted,

remember?"

He flashed a movie star smile at me. "You're not assaulting me." Was he disappointed?

I giggled. "I don't generally assault strange men who hop into my car. It's bad manners."

"Glad to hear it," he replied, still looking at me in a way that made my heart pound. "I don't

generally jump into moving cars."

"That's probably a safe choice."

"I don't generally aim to terrify beautiful women, either."

I blinked at him. Derek Prince thought I was beautiful? He was probably just being polite. I bit my

lip, uncertain.

"Is your wheel okay from where you smacked the curb?" he asked.

"It's probably fine," I mumbled. I smacked into curbs on a regular basis, even when movie stars

weren't dropping in on me.

"We should exchange numbers just in case. I'll pay for it if it's damaged."

"Oh, um, okay," I mumbled, fumbling for my phone, typing in his number and giving him mine.

What was happening? God, he was charming. Was he trying to be charming or was it just natural?

I should still be screaming at him, but I wasn’t. Instead, we were having a perfectly nice

conversation. I hoped it wouldn’t end.

“This has been a very strange day,” I muttered.

Ursula had promised me that her lawyer would be emailing me some paperwork to review this

evening. I wanted to get excited about the prospect of actually working in Hollywood, but I needed it

to be real first. I needed to know what was happening before assigning any emotions to it—positive

or negative. Sebastian had sent me home, correctly interpreting my starstruck, overwhelmed mood

and determining that I’d be useless for the rest of the night. He called in another waitress and insisted

that I get some rest.

“Tell me about it,” Derek said, shaking his head for reasons of his own. “I think today is just the

day of unrelenting weirdness.”

The moment lengthened between us. We were sitting motionless in the alleyway, in the dark. It

might have been halfway romantic if it weren’t so weird. My heart was still pounding away in my

chest, and I wondered vaguely how many gray hairs I’d just added to my head as a result of the last

ten minutes.

“So, um,” I managed eventually. “I was just heading to get some dinner...”

He blinked. “Oh, right. I should get out of your car, huh?” I didn’t know what to say. I just stared

at him. He paused with his hand on the door. “Unless… do you want to go get dinner with me

instead?” he asked.

Derek Prince was asking me out? I didn’t know what to say. He was probably just looking for an

easy hookup. I could only imagine that girls like me were a dime a dozen for a guy like him.

“Dinner?” I was reduced to parroting his statements back to him.

Derek Prince was asking me out? On a date?

“Sure,” he offered, looking at me interestedly. “I could thank you for rescuing me and you could

tell me why your day was weird.”

My heart fluttered.

“I’m not sure I did rescue you,” I replied. “You pretty well rescued yourself. I was just nearby

and in a familiar-looking car. Besides I almost killed us both.”

“So, you admit that your driving left something to be desired.”

I glared, annoyance rushing back in an instant. “I reacted to a bad situation that I did not create.

Besides, you’re alive, aren’t you?”

He laughed. “I was just joking. And yes, I’m grateful to be alive. I’d still like to buy you dinner to

thank you,” he told me, looking at me curiously. “If only to thank you for not calling the police and

having me arrested.”

Ursula had been very clear that my participation in the production would require absolute

secrecy. I hadn’t even seen the contract yet, but I couldn’t imagine she would be pleased to see that I

was sitting in the car with her costar. Besides, I was intimidated. Although certainly not shy, I had a

hard time believing that Derek Prince was genuinely interested in me.

Only the timing couldn’t be worse.

“I’d better not,” I told Derek. “I’ve got an audition first thing tomorrow morning at five a.m.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re an actor?”

I shook my head. “A bit, I guess. Mostly a dancer.”

He couldn’t know that I could sing. Even after just a brief interaction, I knew that Ursula would

freak out if her costar knew she wasn’t really singing her part. She’d probably put a hit out on me or

something. The woman was a bit scary.

“Well, good luck. I understand why you don’t want to go out right before an audition,” Derek told

me, stepping out of the car.

“Actually, I was just going to go pick up In-N-Out,” I stuttered. “It’ll be pretty quick. Do you want

to come?”

I had no idea what was going on except that I wanted it to continue.

He smiled and I melted like hot butter. “Sure.”

5

DEREK

“SO,” I asked Ariel as we ate our meal in the tiny confines of Ariel’s beetle convertible, “how’d you

end up with this killer little car?”

My chatting skills with pretty girls had regressed ten years in the last ten minutes. Although I knew

I should do better, I was apparently now back in high school where cars are a big deal. My eternal

EGOTs quest had not left much time for dating in the past, oh, decade. I could count my dates on my

fingers, and except for a few drunken, one-night stands, I’d had no action to speak of in the past five

years. I was utterly unprepared to be so attracted to someone. I met pretty girls all day long, and

usually I was able to be perfectly suave. Not tonight.

I was just trying to figure out *something* to say. I used to be so charming. At least, I think I was. I

used to at least be able to make small talk. I desperately wanted to impress the woman in front of me,

but I couldn’t for the life of me find the right words. I felt like I was doing this all wrong. Was flirting

always this hard?

Ariel blinked her big blue eyes. “It’s my uncle’s car, actually. It’s neat though, huh? It’s a 1978

model. I hope I look as good when I’m 42.”

With her classic beauty, I’m sure she’d look good forever. Ariel, not the car. God, what was

wrong with me? I wasn’t even making sense in my own brain.

“As long as you get regular oil changes and tire rotations, I’m sure you will.”

She gave me a weird look. “Uh sure. I’ll get right on that.”

What was happening? I was better than this. I was clever. Affable. Smart. People said so. Women

said so. Maybe I’d hit my head or something? I hoped it was just a little brain damage.

“So, what are you auditioning for tomorrow?” I asked, desperate to change the subject.

She flushed. “It’s a dancing role in a movie. Rumor has it, you’re the lead, actually.”

“You follow rumors about my career?” My voice was hopeful, but she seemed mortified.

“No, um, I just heard that somewhere,” she replied, wide-eyed.

“I’m flattered,” I told her, smiling and watching her skin turn as red as her hair.

“I don’t follow rumors about your career,” she mumbled, looking anywhere but at me. Her fingers

fiddled with the ends of her long red hair that had escaped her updo on our breakneck ride. “Really.”

I smiled, feeling a bit more like I knew the territory. She was a fan? I liked the idea of her

watching my movies. I hoped she found me entertaining… and attractive.

“Never?” I asked.

“No,” she replied haughtily. “Of course not. I’m not some screaming fan girl.”

“Too bad.”

“If that’s really important to you, I can scream at you some more,” she said. “But I thought we

were past that.”

“So, you’re too good for movies?” I teased.

“Obviously not, I’m auditioning for one tomorrow.”

“What movie?” I questioned.

I knew already, but I was making conversation that I wasn’t bombing. I didn’t want to jinx it.

“She Done Him Wrong,” Ariel replied, still looking embarrassed. “It’s just a chorus girl position,

I mean, not exactly my dream job but everybody's got to start somewhere…" She trailed off

uncomfortably.

"What is your dream job?"

Her gaze flitted to mine and then immediately away. "Whatever pays the bills for now."

"And then what? Stunt driver?" I supplied.

"No. Not stunt driver." She frowned and rolled her eyes. "You're not funny."

"The People's Choice awards for 2017 disagreed with you when they voted me best actor in a

comedy," I joked. I was funny…right?

"2016," she said.

"What?"

"Eventually I want to be on Broadway," she replied in a hurry.

"As a dancer?" I probed, momentarily distracted from her correction of the year I'd won the

award. She looked like a dancer. She looked much more like a dancer than a stunt driver.

She nodded and her red curls bobbed.

"Broadway is great," I told her. "Cutthroat, but no worse than the movies. It's tons of fun. You

should probably move to New York though. There's not that much dance work here in LA."

“Well, I have to make enough money to move across the country first,” she replied simply. She

stared down at her hamburger. The one I hadn’t paid for.

I felt like an idiot. A rude idiot. I rarely thought about money. When your dad is a tech billionaire

turned eccentric philanthropist and movie magnate, there’s really no need. I’d been born rich and

gotten famous. The struggles of most actors had never applied to me.

“Oh, right,” I managed. “That makes sense.”

“What made you want to come be in movies?” she asked next. “Why would you want to leave the

stage?”

I shrugged. “EGOTs. And my brother.”

“Which brother?”

I was blessed with three brothers, all Hollywood mainstays. “The ugly one.”

I meant my fraternal twin, Tommy, but didn’t want to get into it. The jerk had just beat me to an

Oscar. Granted, he didn’t have any of the others…

“You don’t have any ugly brothers,” Ariel was replying. “I mean, there’s definitely a hierarchy,

but…” she trailed off, looking mortified.

“You are a fan, aren’t you?” I pushed. It was obvious. I don’t know why she didn’t want to admit

it.

“No,” she replied, sticking her nose in the air like she was too refined for movies. “I’m just a

movie buff and discerning woman. The Prince family is everywhere, so it’s not like I can avoid an

opinion.”

I smirked at her. “Okay, okay. How about you settle a long-standing question for me. Who’s the

best-looking Prince family member?” I asked curiously. This was always a topic of discussion when

my brothers got together.

Say me.

Say me.

She stared at me. “Scarlett.” Ariel’s face was certainly scarlet.

I laughed. Scarlett Prince was my newborn cousin, the daughter of my uncle Connor. “Well-

played.” I shook my head. “She is cute.”

Ariel followed at least one Prince family member’s career and gossip. The fact that it was my

uncle Connor and not me was a bit of an ego blow, but I could deal. I would just make her like me

through my winning personality. It was a shame I seemed to have forgotten it at home today.

“I better get home,” she mumbled. “I really do have an early day tomorrow.”

Ariel looked like she might spontaneously combust if I kept asking her questions. I’d probably

pushed her about as far as I dared. It would take more than one conversation with her to draw her out.

But I found myself fascinated. She was alternately tough and vulnerable, open and secretive, and so

pretty I could stare at her all night. But as much as I wanted to stay with her, I knew my time was up.

Any longer, and I’d just be creepy.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Ariel,” I told her, hopping out of the convertible. I could call an

Uber from here. “I hope I’ll see you on set. Break a leg.”

“Thank you. It was nice meeting you, too. Except for the whole jumping into my car thing. I could

have done without that.”

“Next time, I’ll do better. You’ve got my number. Call me sometime and I’ll prove it to you. We’ll

go out for real and I’ll show you I’m not crazy.”

She smiled at me like I was teasing her. After she drove off, I felt alternately better and worse

than I had in a long time. There was something about that girl.

6

ARIEL

“ARIEL, WE NEED TO TALK.” My dad’s voice sounded disappointed. That was nothing new. I was

always a source of disappointment to him in one way or another. But I’d just gotten a job and Derek

Prince’s phone number. I could do anything.

“What’s up?” I asked warily. I wasn’t really in the mood for another long lecture about how I

wasn’t living up to my potential. After the insane day I’d had, I really wanted to curl up in my bed and

try to make some sense out of it. I met Ursula Jones. She offered me a job. Then I met Derek Prince.

We ate hamburgers. My mind was still blown.

“I know you haven’t applied to Stanford,” my dad told me. “I called the dean today to ask about

your application and he said you hadn’t even sent in an LSAT score.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He knew.

He knew I hadn’t taken the test. He knew I hadn’t applied anywhere. He knew I’d been lying.

“You did what?” I stuttered.

“I called the dean,” he told me. “You know he’s an old law school buddy of mine, don’t you? I

wanted to just, you know, help your application along a little bit. But you haven’t even applied?! Do

you know how foolish that makes me look?”

I swallowed my anger. “Dad, I don’t need you calling schools to get me in.”

“Apparently you do,” he replied. “Because you aren’t even trying.”

“I only lied because I knew you couldn’t handle knowing the truth.”

“That you’re scared?” my dad asked soothingly. My blood boiled. “Sweetie, you’ll do fine on the

test. You’re very smart.”

“No! That I don’t want to go to law school.”

He laughed. “Of course, you do.”

“No. You want me to. I want to be here. In LA. Pursuing my dream.” I took a deep breath. “But

now you know. At least it’s all out in the open now. You know I haven’t been working on

applications. I haven’t been studying. And I’m not going to.”

I rubbed my temples in frustration. I couldn’t see his condescending look, but I could imagine it. I

could practically hear the expression. After all, I saw a lot of it. His blue eyes would be narrowed,

freckled arms folded over themselves, and he’d be staring down his nose at me like I was a

disobedient four-year-old who had just asked the world’s dumbest question. The silence lengthened. I

hoped this was the end of the conversation.

“Thankfully, I’ve taken care of it,” he said eventually. “But I can’t cover for you forever.”

I blinked. Of course, it wasn’t the end of the conversation. How often did I get the last word?

Never. However, his words weren’t making any sense to me.

“What do you mean you took care of it?” I asked him. I’m sure my voice betrayed my fear.

“You’ve been provisionally accepted into the next class,” my dad explained. “You need to move

back here and enroll. You’ll have to submit an LSAT score as soon as possible.”

My mouth fell open. “What do you mean I’ve been provisionally accepted? I didn’t apply to

attend the school. I didn’t even take the LSAT.”

There was no law school that would accept someone who didn’t take the LSAT, right? Especially

if I didn’t want to attend…

“I said I took care of it,” he repeated. “Don’t ask me how. But you can pay me back when you

make partner. Buy me a Rolex or something.”

My head, which had already not been feeling great, suddenly throbbed with a new headache.

“Dad, I don’t want to be a lawyer,” I ventured. No matter how many times I tried to tell my dad this,

he never seemed to be able to absorb it. “I don’t want to go to Stanford.”

“It’s what you’re good at!” he snapped. “This is what you have to do!”

I shook my head furiously from side to side and then instantly regretted it. Not only could he not

see me, but the movement aggravated the pain. “Dad, we’ve been over this. That’s your dream for me.

Not my dream for me.”

“You’re right,” my dad said, although I didn’t trust it for a second. “We have been over this. But

you’re still failing to make a compelling argument. We both know you’re not going to make it in LA.”

“I got a job today,” I told him. “In a movie. I’m going to be in a movie. So, how’s that for a

compelling argument?”

It wasn’t technically true. Not yet. But it would be.

“You got a job?” My dad sounded stunned, which was not exactly a comforting reaction. “How

much does it pay?”

I frowned. I didn’t know yet. “Enough.”

He laughed. “So, nothing?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Then basically nothing,” he said.

“There’s more to life than money,” I told him.

“But there’s nothing that will make life harder than having none.”

My dad cared so much about money. Money was nice and all, and I’d grown up with a good

amount of it, but it wasn’t everything. It wasn’t enough to trade my dreams of performing for. I hated

studying. The thought of going to law school for three years was about as appealing as an internship in

pig farming. It just wasn’t my thing.

There were a lot of girls out there who wanted to go to law school. Let them have the spots. They

deserved them way more than me, and they probably didn’t have overbearing moms and dads who

were willing to do God-knows-what to get their kids in. I didn’t even want to think about what my

dad offered the dean. I bet it had a lot of zeros on it.

“I don’t want to go to law school. I don’t like that you got me in without my knowledge. I didn’t

deserve to get in.”

It was majorly unethical. It probably wasn’t illegal because my dad was way too smart for that.

But whatever he did wasn’t ethical, I knew that much. He’d taken someone else’s spot in that class

and given it to me, a girl who didn’t deserve it.

“Listen, Ariel, I love you. I’m doing this because I love you. Come home. Enroll in classes. Take

the LSAT. Forget about this silly dream of yours. I let you major in whatever you wanted in

undergraduate. I even thought a performing arts degree was a good idea. Easy A's, you know? But it's

time to grow up now. Your mother and I have been incredibly patient. But you need to wake up.

You're not going to be the next big thing."

"You don't know that," I said. It hurt to be rejected at auditions, but it hurt even more to be

rejected by my own parent. He never thought I had any talent. He only allowed me to pursue the arts

because it made me 'well rounded' on applications.

"I do." He sighed. "Sweetie, you're special and talented but compared to what's out there…

you're not special enough. I've been an entertainment lawyer for twenty years. I've seen a million

girls like you trying to make it. Believe me, you're better on this side of the desk."

"I'll be the judge of that."

I'd been giving half-answers and equivocations for going on a year now to my mom and dad about

my law school prospects. Any time I tried to be direct it just resulted in a fight. But now I had a job.

He had to see that things were different now.

The silence between us stretched again. I prayed he was listening to me. Finally seeing my side.

Or at least caring about what I wanted. That would be an improvement.

“I guess you will be,” he said.

My mouth dropped open. “Are you serious?”

He laughed. “Yeah, I am,” he told me. “I’m dead serious. *You’re cut off*. Effective right now. You

can have your allowance back when you come to your senses.”

I froze. I wasn’t making nearly enough working at Sebastian’s to survive. If this thing with Ursula

didn’t work out, I’d be broke. I’d be forced to move home and then I’d really be at my family’s mercy.

“Fine,” I stuttered. “Great. I’m ready. I’ve got an opportunity that’s going to make me famous. Just

you wait.”

“Oh, I’m waiting,” my dad replied confidently. “I’m waiting to hear you walking in the front door.

You’ll be home in a few weeks when your opportunity doesn’t pan out. Then we’ll have a serious talk

about your future.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I snapped. I hung up and immediately checked my savings account. Five

hundred dollars. I had five hundred dollars and… I rifled through my purse for my tips from

Sebastian's… twenty-six dollars and fifty cents. Five hundred twenty-six dollars and fifty cents

doesn't go far in LA, even with the reduced rent I was paying to Sebastian.

I could officially afford another month and then I'd be broke.

This plan needed to work out. I was willing to make any sacrifice necessary. Because giving up

on my dreams and letting my dad win? That wasn't going to happen. Not when I'd just met Derek

Prince.

7

ARIEL

"HOW WAS the dance audition this morning? You nailed it right?" Sebastian asked me the following

afternoon. Just as promised by Ursula, I'd received all the paperwork and had spent the remainder of

last night and most of this morning reading through it. It wasn't exactly written in plain English.

Luckily for me, both my parents are lawyers. I'm better at reading legalese than the average bear.

I shrugged my shoulders, which felt a bit sore after all the exercise. "Not too bad," I answered

when Sebastian repeated his question because I'd zoned off. "I thought it was pretty easy. I should

hear back tomorrow."

Fifteen years of dance lessons had paid off pretty well. I could high-kick with the best of them. A

lot of other girls can too, though, so if I didn't have a foot in the door with the help of Ursula Jones, I

doubted I'd have a chance in hell to get the job. There are too many talented young women who can

sing and dance in Hollywood. Without some kind of an advantage, I could spend my entire life trying

to break into Hollywood, or at least the next decade until I was just too old to break in.

"And how does the contract look?" Sebastian asked me.

I shrugged again, trying and probably failing to play it cool. "About what I expected. Total

secrecy or they can sue me into the year three thousand."

The contract required that I never under any circumstances reveal that I was the voice behind

Ursula Jones. She would have absolute rights to my voice on the production, and afterwards. I'd get a

small residual for any recordings, but other than that, I would be totally signing over my voice. I

would be required to record my parts in secret, after hours. I'd be bound to unlimited re-recordings if

the production required it.

I'd be required to lie to anyone who asked me either directly or indirectly about my relationship

with Ursula. I couldn’t speak to her unless spoken to on set or off. I wasn’t to ever speak to the press.

And I was to do everything in my power to ensure that Ursula came off in the best light possible.

Anything that I did that ran counter to that goal in any way would be considered breach of contract.

I’d basically be her slave. But the rewards were very real.

“So, are you going to do it?” Sebastian asked. “Are you going to sign over your voice for the

movie?”

I bit my lip. “I think so.”

“Even though you won’t get credit?” Sebastian asked. He cocked his head to the side. “That might

end up being kind of frustrating.”

I nodded my head, pushing my meticulously straightened auburn hair behind my ears. “I know. I’m

conflicted about it. But I know if I don’t jump at this opportunity, I’ll regret it.”

Meeting Derek Prince had also influenced my decision, but I didn’t want to say it. Ever since I’d

met him, I’d been unable to stop thinking about him. In fact, I almost messed up my choreography at

the audition because of it. I powered through and did fine, but he was definitely on my mind.

“I’m excited for you,” Sebastian told me, “even though it’s going to mean I’m going to need to hire

another waitress.”

“Just don’t hire a permanent one,” I reminded him. “Nothing is guaranteed. I might wash out.”

He shook his head. “You’ll get another job after this one,” he said confidently. “This is the foot in

the door you needed.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said uncertainly. I needed him to be right.

“Don’t worry,” Sebastian told me. “I won’t hire anyone right away. But I know this is just the first

step for you. Once you get out there and people start seeing what you can do, roles will start

happening for you. And I don’t just mean chorus girl roles either.”

I smiled at him. It was nice to have someone in my corner. My parents certainly weren’t.

“Are you going to have your mom or dad look over the contract?” Sebastian asked, reading my

mind.

I swallowed. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

My dad had literally just cut me off when I finally told him that I had no desire to go to law

school. He’d promised me that a few months of failing at my dream would wake me up to reality. He

expected me to come to realize that I didn’t have the talent or connections to make my Hollywood

dreams come true and then to come crawling back to him and his oppressive expectations for what my

life should be. I knew it would be a hard adjustment not having a credit card to finance my spoiled,

pampered lifestyle, but I actually thought it might do me good in a way that I don’t think was his

intention. I believed that I could work for a living and still pursue my dream, and now that I was right

on the cusp of achieving it, I wasn’t going to let him sabotage it.

“It might be a good idea,” he said mildly. “I know your relationship with your parents has been

kind of strained lately, but your dad is one of the best entertainment lawyers out there. He could

probably help.”

“I can’t afford him,” I joked. My dad averaged a few thousand dollars an hour for reviewing

documents. He’d become very rich on his specialized skills.

“You’re his daughter, I’m sure he’d make the time,” Sebastian said gently. “And I’m sure he’d

want to.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said, feeling the familiar sting of parental disappointment. “I don’t want to

bother him with it.”

Besides, I’d already signed the contract and sent it back to Ursula. Assuming I’d passed the dance

audition, and I’d be stunned if I hadn’t, then I’d be starting production on ‘She Done Him Wrong’ next

Monday. I was excited and scared to have a shot at my dream. And getting to see Derek Prince again,

even if it was just on a crowded soundstage, sounded pretty fantastic too. Maybe we’d even end up

going out to dinner.

8

DEREK

“WE FINALLY GOT the first vocal recording from Ursula’s people,” my studio connection Clint told me

when I met him for our production meeting the next Monday. We were meeting in his office.

Collaborating with my brother Holden on this project was one of the few things that made working

with Ursula worth it, but both of us were just small potatoes compared to Clint. I met with him once a

week to discuss things. “You’re going to want to hear it.”

I snapped out of my daydream reluctantly. I’d been thinking about the girl from Sebastian’s, Ariel.

Again. I hadn’t been able to get my mind off her for a solid week. I’d had dream after dream of a

different version of that night’s events where I’d taken her home with me and made her mine. She’d

said she was a dancer, and my fantasies all capitalized on her, um, flexibility. I liked a girl who was

limber and adventurous, not to mention sarcastic and funny. It was a silly fantasy, I was supposed to

be focusing on my career with unequivocal resolve until I got my dang Oscar, but I couldn’t resist it.

I hadn’t texted her yet. I hadn’t figured out what to say. But it was only a matter of time.

Eventually I’d come up with something clever and start a conversation.

She’d really been something, that little Ariel Cross. She was spunky, athletic but still feminine,

and so pretty with her long red hair and cute freckles. She was probably too young for me. After she

stopped screaming at me, that is. But that was legitimately all my fault. I’d probably scream if

someone came dropping into my car out of nowhere.

And Ariel had been funny and friendly too, despite the absurdity of the whole situation. I thought

she had liked me back, although maybe she was just nervous. I hadn’t been able to forget her at all. I

did get her number, although instead of calling I supposed I could just go back to Sebastian’s if I

wanted to find her since she said that she worked there. I’d been trying to come up with some kind of

cover story for why I should. I didn’t want to come off as creepy, as having leapt into her car like a

crazy person had probably not made the greatest first impression on her.

“I thought you’d be more excited,” Clint said, drawing me back to the here and now. He was

staring at me interestedly.

“I am!” I insisted. “I’m very excited. This is my excited face.” I attempted an excited face.

He laughed. “You look worried. Or maybe constipated.”

“I’m excited.”

Since I was acting in as well as helping to choreograph some of the movie, I did need to hear

Ursula’s voice. I needed to know what she sounded like so I could really conceptualize the music and

feel like I understood it. The piano part was nice and all, but it didn’t convey any human emotion.

“Lay it on me,” I said, expecting nothing much. “Let’s see what we’ve got to work with.”

“I think you’re going to be surprised,” Clint said, smiling mysteriously.

“Pleasantly surprised?” I asked. What if Ursula sounded like a bad Stevie Nicks impersonator?

Or was tone deaf? We’d be right back at casting square one.

He rolled his eyes. “Just listen.”

I prepared myself for mediocrity. Ursula had been texting me almost daily over the past week. I

didn’t know how to let her down gently. I had to work with her, so I couldn’t just tell her off. And my

attempts to firmly but politely tell her that I had no romantic interest in her seemed to fly over her

head. I was left just ignoring most of her texts. It seemed like the safest bet.

Clint punched play on his sound system and we both listened to the familiar opening chords of

Ursula’s first number. Then, the vocals started. My lower jaw hit the floor.

Ursula’s voice wasn’t merely beautiful. It was phenomenal. Clear, crystalline, and powerful,

Ursula’s soaring soprano was technically ideal. But it was her phrasing and delivery—the emotion

behind her voice-- that really made her performance so completely unique and totally unforgettable.

Her singing voice was so unlike her speaking voice. I felt like I could listen to it for hours, totally

entranced. Mae West was a throaty, sexy alto, but somehow the song worked with a lighter, younger

voice.

From the first bar to the final reprise, I sat stunned. Hypnotized. When the recording finally shut

off, I reached over and played it a second time, just to make sure the first time hadn’t been an

elaborate auditory hallucination. It wasn’t. The second time it was even better, because I was able to

hear the details now that I wasn’t so surprised.

“Is that really Ursula?” I stuttered eventually. “She’s—she’s just incredible.”

Clint nodded his head with a bemused expression on his face. I could tell he shared my stunned

reaction, although this obviously wasn’t his first time hearing the recording. Then again, Clint was a

studio bigwig, not a musician. He couldn’t possibly be as impressed as I was. “She really knocked it

out of the park, huh?”

“*This is going to be a huge hit*.”

I could already see the rave reviews now.

Clint’s mouth drew up into a wide smile. “I could have told you that.”

I’d been fairly lukewarm on the production up until this moment, and even more lukewarm on

Ursula, but now, I wondered if I wasn’t in love with her. Is it possible to fall in love with someone on

the sound of their voice? I didn’t know. Then I remembered her repellent personality and banished the

thought.

“Do we have the next song?” I asked, eager for more. I could listen to that voice all day. She

could sing ‘Row Row Row Your Boat’ and I’d listen to it. If only Ursula’s speaking voice were half

as lovely as her singing one.

Clint shook his head. “No. Not yet. In the next couple of days.” He paused. “So, does this mean

you’re officially on board for this project with me?”

I’d been equivocating until I heard Ursula sing. But now, I nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. I’m

definitely on board now.”

“And Holden?”

“He was only holding out because I was.”

“Good, because the studio wants you and Ursula to start promoting it like last week and I want to

start shooting immediately. What do you think about dating Ursula, just casually, until the premiere?”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“For publicity purposes.”

“You’re joking,” I stuttered.

“I’m really not.” Clint’s expression was utterly placid. “From a promotional angle, this is the best

move.”

I froze. He was serious. “I know this is a movie set in the 1930’s, but you can’t tell me who to

date.”

“It’s just a suggestion. You know that costars who seem romantically linked can drive ticket sales.

It can even drive Oscar buzz. Think about it.”

Ordinarily I’d be pragmatic. I usually was. But not at the moment. All I was thinking at that

moment was whether Ariel had gotten cast as a chorus girl. I wanted to see her again.

9

ARIEL

“STEP-BALL-CHANGE, step-ball-change, kick, kick, high kick, two steps and then a double pirouette,”

the choreographer told us, walking us through a simple routine. She was a no-nonsense woman named

Mia in her late forties, elegant, cold, and precise. She reminded me of every ballet teacher I’d ever

had. “Let’s take group one, then group two starts on the kick. Five, six, seven, eight…”

It was hour four of day one of rehearsals for the chorus and my feet were already tired. It had

been almost a year since I’d worn my character heels, and damn were they still every bit as

uncomfortable as I remembered them being. The shoes were designed to be the most comfortable

heels you can dance in, but really that's not saying much. Dancing in heels is not for the weak nor

inexperienced. I would need to pick up some Epsom salts on the way home.

"Your character heels have seen better days, huh?" one of the other dancers said to me while we

were on break.

It was a dig. Character shoes aren't like pointe shoes. They aren't supposed to look like crap. But

mine did. Four years of dancing in college had basically destroyed them. The bottoms were worn thin

and they were covered in scuffs. But character shoes are expensive. At least until my first paycheck

cleared, I was going to have to make do with what I had.

I'd shrugged my shoulders like I was oblivious to the attitude. "I dance a lot, what can I say? It

feels like I'm always buying new ones and they just never last."

"Hmm," she replied, rolling her eyes. "Well, it's probably time to get some new ones."

"Thanks for the suggestion," I said sweetly. But my eyes said , *keep your rudeness to yourself*.

The girl shuffled off, presumably to bully somebody else.

I shook my head to clear the annoyance out. I had to shine today because we were getting our

groups assigned and unless I wanted to be in the back, I had to impress the indomitable Mia. I was in

group three right now. I needed to fix that. On the next round, I plastered a big smile to my face and

held my chin up high. The steps were easy for a trained dancer. It was the attitude that was really

important. I needed it to look effortless, and my reflection in the mirror looked like she was having

the time of her life.

“Ariel!” the choreographer said, grabbing me by the elbow as I turned to get a drink of water, “get

up to group one. Laurie, go join group three.”

Thank goodness. Laurie, a girl with deep-set dark eyes and a huge frown gave me the stink eye as

we passed. Or maybe that was just her face. Either way, I tried not to let it get me down. We were all

here for one reason. And it wasn’t to become very best-est friends and braid each other’s hair.

Dancing is an extraordinarily cutthroat business, even by show business standards. Depending on

what group you were placed in during the first few weeks of rehearsals, you might spend the entire

routine in the back. Or dancing behind a bush. Or not making it in the number at all if there were too

many girls to fit on stage, or in this case, camera. I refused to be in the back. Nobody puts Baby in a

corner, right?

Dancing and singing my way through college had meant a lot of long nights, early rehearsals,

herbal teas, and blisters on my heels. It had not allowed a ton of time for dating. I'd had a couple of

brief relationships but nothing lasting or particularly interesting. I hadn't developed any particular

skill for having crushes. So, when I saw Derek when I came into the studio this morning and he

recognized me, it had been like middle school all over again. I blushed. I froze. And then, right when I

thought he might come over to say hello, I bolted.

Yeah, it wasn't my finest moment. I ran away like a scared little girl. Put Derek in the room right

now and I'd be demoted to group five in an instant. But, at least for the moment, I was totally in my

element. Next door Ursula and Derek were rehearsing their portion of this number and we'd be

combining our groups after lunch, but I would deal with that after I made it through learning this

routine. I was starting to feel it now.

Despite the competitiveness, cattiness, and physical exertion, dancing makes you feel like

virtually nothing else. It's freeing; turning your body into an instrument and then surrendering to music

is a lot like flying. Even when it hurts, and sometimes it hurts badly, it's wonderful. Transcendent.

It was easy to imagine the finished product when I was dancing. They'd shown us the costumes

earlier, and the set. We'd be nightclub girls in the movie, dancing in a floor show at a criminal-run

casino and hotel. The fact that I'd be performing this routine for audiences around the country on the

silver screen was enough to make me forget the throbbing in my toes.

Besides, these shoes were just for rehearsal. Our actual performance shoes would be much more

uncomfortable, since they'd be period. Our outfits for this number were emerald green, low cut,

bedazzled little flapper dresses with skirts about an inch long. We'd be all leg and glitter, except for

our ridiculous headdresses, which had enormous feathers coming out of them. I couldn't wait. I loved

a good crazy peacock costume. The space we'd be shooting in was an incredibly preserved 1930's

ballroom, too. It was like something out of a much more glamorous, sparkling time in history. It was

all so ridiculously Gatsby that I could just cry.

"Did you hear that Derek Prince and Ursula Jones are dating in real life?" one of the girls asked

me during one of our breaks.

I shook my head.

“That’s the rumor,” she continued. “I know this girl, Meg Butler, who said she’d pay five hundred

dollars if one of us could get a picture of them kissing.”

I frowned. Derek was dating Ursula? I didn’t know how I felt about that. Oh, who was I kidding? I

felt horrible about that. I hated the idea. In my greedy little fan girl heart, I didn’t think that he should

be with anyone but me.

“Five hundred dollars for a picture?” I asked, feeling like I had to say something or reveal my

hopeless, ridiculous crush on Derek. “That seems like a lot.”

She nodded seriously. “I know, right?! I’m going to keep my eyes peeled.”

Mia clapped her hands to get our attention. “Okay, all groups once more across the floor in order

and then we’ll all break for lunch,” Mia told us. “I’m sure you girls are hungry.” She didn’t really

sound like she cared that much about our well-being. Mia reminded me of a sexy, younger, dancing

Professor McGonagall from Harry Potter. “Now smile big girls! Fix, six, seven, eight…”

I finished my steps confidently, feeling like maybe I was finally getting the hang of this. It wasn’t

that different from college when we were here in this rehearsal space. It was just another dance class,

and I’d been to an awful lot of dance classes in my time. I ought to have it down by now.

“You’re Ariel, right?” one of my fellow dancers asked me as we filed out to the assembled salad

bar that craft services had laid out for us.

I nodded at her, piling my plate high with as many carbs as I could find. I needed fuel for this

afternoon, plus I was nervous. “Yes, I am,” I replied, smiling over my shoulder. “What’s your name?”

“Flo,” she answered, tossing her blonde hair back. She’d taken it out of her dancer’s bun already

and it inexplicably fell in perfect waves around her pretty face. “And this is Jess.”

A nearly identical platinum blonde nodded. “Hi Ariel.”

They were both in group one with me. I had been impressed with them both during the morning

workshop. “It’s nice to meet you both,” I said, glad to be meeting them even if just to know my

competition. There’s a delicate balance to be had in the dance world. It’s competitive, yes, but being

a total raging bitch was really only a strategy if you were a thousand times better than everyone else.

Otherwise you needed your fellow dancers as much as you were destined to compete with them. I

hoped Flo and Jess would prove worthy allies as well as adversaries.

“Where are you from?” Flo asked me as we ate.

“Sacramento. What about you two?”

“I’m from Kansas,” Jess chimed in. Her midwestern accent pretty much gave that away. “The land

of cows, bland food, and fat people.” Yikes. I didn’t think Jess liked her home state very much. She

poked at her salad like it was personally offensive to her. “I’m never going back.”

“I’m from Washington,” Flo replied. “The land of rain, salmon, and white people with

dreadlocks. But obviously we’re all here for the same thing now, aren’t we? Get famous no matter

what.”

I laughed. “I guess so.”

“So,” Jess asked, “are you going to bleach your hair or wear a wig?”

I blinked. “What?”

Jess and Flo exchanged a look and then looked back at me like I was an idiot. “Your bright red

hair,” Jess repeated, more slowly this time. “What are you going to do with it?”

I was still confused. “What?” Did my hair look bad?

Jess’s expression turned pitying. “Look around,” she said. “What color hair does everyone else

have on this production?”

I looked around myself at my fellow dancers. Blonde, blonde, dirty blonde, platinum blonde… oh

wait. “Well, I mean, we are in LA. It’s not that unusual to be in a room full of skinny white women

with blonde hair,” I argued.

“*But we’re supposed to have blonde hair*,” Flo said, pulling out the packet they gave us this

morning. I hadn’t read it yet. “It’s on page eight. See, it’s right here. It’s required.”

I leaned over and read the passage that Flo’s red acrylic nail was pointing to. She was completely

correct. ‘Blonde hair, between level seven and twelve, no reddish or pink tones.’ There were also

guidelines about our makeup, stockings, underwear, and other personal topics. I guess it all made

sense, but I’d need to read that damn packet sooner rather than later.

“Really?” I asked, shaking my head and feeling like my hair had just suddenly become three

shades brighter and could now be seen from space. No wonder people had been staring at me this

morning. My hair was wrong. “Well, I guess I’ll have to think about that then.”

I’d had nearly every color hair under the sun between high school and now, but it had taken almost

three years to grow my natural dark red color back out. I didn’t really fancy having to bleach it again.

Besides, I really liked my natural hair color. There aren't that many natural redheads out there. We

gingers are a dying breed and need to be preserved.

"Well, you better take care of it quick," Jess said. "We were supposed to have our hair done

today. I bleached my roots last night."

"I'll figure it out," I stuttered. They were both looking at me like I was dumb. I guess I should

have read the packet! This was my first time on a film. I hadn't expected this.

"I mean, you want to be famous, right?" Flo asked, nibbling on a celery stick. "You might as well

just take the plunge and bleach it. Like you said, this is LA. Blondes rule here."

I frowned back at her. "Amy Adams has red hair and she's a big star."

Flo shook her head at me like I was being very dim. "Sure. But Amy Adams didn't get famous

until her thirties. Do you really want to wait that long?" The way Flo said 'thirties' you would have

thought that was ancient.

I picked up a baby carrot. "What about, um, Isla Fisher?" I asked, taking a bite.

"Isn't she just the less famous version of Amy Adams?" Flo responded. "Like, the same face with

half the talent?"

“Okay, fine. Jessica Chastain?”

“She’s in her *forties*,” Jess retorted. “Same with Christina Hendricks. You have to admit it,

redheads don’t get famous young.”

I shook my head. “Nuh-uh. What about Emma Stone? She’s redheaded, young, and famous.”

“She’s not a redhead,” Flo said adamantly. “That was a dye job.”

“Isn’t she?” I asked. I was pretty sure she was a redhead. She seemed like ginger if I’d ever seen

one. And I saw one every morning in the mirror.

“No, she’s a blonde,” Flo said.

Jess was poking at her phone. “Actually, she’s a brunette.”

She showed us a picture. Huh. Apparently, Flo and I were both wrong.

“Well, considering the number of redheads in the world, there are actually a lot of us getting

famous,” I said finally. “I’ll dye my hair for this job, but then I’m going right back to red.”

“Your funeral,” Jess said, shrugging her shoulders. “Also, you might want to lay off the carrot

sticks. They’re full of carbs and you’re already not the slimmest.”

I rolled my eyes. Dancers. Always so catty. But I put the carrot stick down.

I finished my salad, wondering if they were right. Should I lay off the carbs? I had put on a few

pounds since college ended. Nothing major, but I was not a size two anymore. Should I start dyeing

my hair? Did blondes have a better shot in Hollywood?

Ugh, I wished I was tougher. It was hard to keep track of my own priorities when other people

had so many opinions. Not having control of my own voice was one thing. But it didn't look like I'd

have control of much at all on this production. I thumbed through my booklet to see that my weight,

makeup, hair, and nails were going to be carefully controlled once we started filming. Even my

manners would be scrutinized. And I was just in the background. All that freedom I'd felt when I was

dancing evaporated. I was so tied up in my own worries that I almost bumped into Derek Prince.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, putting my hands on his chest to avoid running straight into him in the hallway.

"Sorry!"

He put his hands over mine, steadying me. I gazed up at him, utterly entranced.

"Hello Ariel," he said, smiling down at me. "It's nice to see you again. I still owe you a proper

dinner, if memory serves."

10

DEREK

ARIEL LOOKED like every horny teenage boy’s ballerina fantasy in her skin-tight black leotard. I’d

known she was attractive, that was patently obvious even in her jeans and T-shirt from our first

meeting, but wearing a dancer’s leotard and some sheer dancer’s tights? Jesus.

She was tiny, maybe five foot three, but with long, gorgeous legs, round hips, a tiny waist… my

pulse was racing just looking at her. I imagined those round, full tits of hers looked fantastic when she

was dancing around, and her cute butt could make me do things. The black played off her milky pale

skin and her freckles stood out, just begging to be counted. Her red hair was piled atop her head in the

classic ballerina bun and I wanted to pull it down, run my fingers through it, and mess it up. A

thorough, rough, visceral fantasy of doing just exactly that, and more, shot through me like a drug. I

could see the details now. We’d just go out to my trailer…

“Hi Derek,” she stuttered, taking me back to the present and twisting me around her little finger.

Her voice was soft and the way she looked at me made my heart pound. But I obviously wasn’t going

to be taking her to my trailer. One, that was trashy. Two, I barely knew her. And three, I shouldn’t be

fraternizing. The studio wanted me to go out with Ursula for ‘publicity.’ Yuck.

“What are you up to?” I asked, and then cringed. She was eating lunch. Obviously. We were all on

lunch break. One hot redhead and I was suddenly reduced to a gameless, slobbering fool again. I

suppose I should have practiced what I was going to say to her.

She didn’t seem to notice my mistake. “Oh,” she mumbled, “nothing.”

“You got the part!” I said, happy to see her again. She was just as pretty as I remembered. And she

wasn’t screaming at me this time at all. Progress!

She nodded shyly at me. “Yes, I did. And just in the nick of time.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

She shrugged her narrow shoulders. “I was down to the dregs of my bank account. Getting this job

means I’ll get to stay around a little bit longer and not move home.”

I didn’t know what to say to her. That was the reality for most struggling performers in LA. It had

never been my reality though. I’d been born with a silver spoon in my mouth and then when I decided

I wanted to go into acting, I’d had a very famous uncle who could help me and a father who could

finance me forever. I’d never seriously considered for a second that I wouldn’t succeed.

“I’m glad you got the part,” I said. “I wanted to see you again.”

She blinked her big blue eyes. “Why?”

“Why do you think?”

Ariel turned bright pink again. “My incredible stunt driving?”

“Yeah, that was it.” I laughed at her and she smiled shyly back at me. “What were you thinking

about earlier?” I asked, wanting to change the subject before I stuck my foot so far down my own

throat I couldn’t recover. “You looked so serious.”

Ariel shook her head. “Oh. Just, um, geopolitics and world economics.”

“Really?” I asked. If we had to discuss those subjects, then I was probably doomed. I stayed

reasonably apprised of world events, but I was no expert. I knew just enough to probably sound like a

perfect idiot. I’d only gone to college for one year and had never been a strong student at all. That

was more my twin’s thing. I was president of my pledge class though. That was something.

She giggled at me. “No. Not really. I don’t know anything about geopolitics. I was just

considering what color blonde to go tonight. An equally important and serious subject, obviously.”

She winked.

I laughed, glad she was loosening up a bit, although horrified by the prospect she raised. “Ariel,

don’t dye your hair.” Why would she dye it? It was beautiful. How many women naturally have hair

that color? I’d never seen one.

I’d also never had a thing for redheads before. I had a serious thing for them now, though. Well,

for one of them anyway.

“I have to,” she explained, pulling out a booklet the studio must have given her. “We’re required

to have blonde hair. It’s in the chorus girl rulebook. Right there next to the acceptable lipstick colors.”

I frowned at her. “You could just wear a wig. You only need to be a blonde for the days we’re

filming.”

“Dancing in a wig is no fun.”

I nodded reluctantly. She was right, of course. I’d been forced to do it myself a few times. Wigs

are hot, itchy, and depending on how much you are dancing, smelly. Wigs can be washed, but it is a

lot of work. Plus, the studio wouldn’t spring for a nice one. Ariel was just a chorus girl, so she’d be

forced to buy her own. I could understand why she was considering the peroxide, even if it broke my

heart.

“I like your hair, for what it’s worth,” I told her. I resisted the urge to try and touch it. It wouldn’t

be welcome. I barely knew her.

Her soft-looking, full lips parted in surprise and I stared hungrily at them. At least those lips

would stay the same when she dyed her hair.

“That’s nice of you to say,” she mumbled. Her pale skin was flushed again.

“You never did text me,” I said, wondering if it was even worth bringing up. “I hoped you

would.”

Her expression became carefully neutral and she looked anywhere but at me. “I’m not that kind of

girl.”

I frowned. “What kind?”

“Whatever kind you think I am. The stammering, starstruck kind that’s happy to just be something

on the side—”

I shook my head and cut her off. “I’m not that kind of guy.”

Her eyes were wide. I understood her reluctance. I mean, what kind of normal relationship could

she ever have with me? My life was bizarre. And I had a reputation as someone who didn’t date.

Hell, I hadn’t had a relationship in years. But that had been because I hadn’t met anyone I liked. This

was different.

She liked me. I liked her. This was where I figured out how to make a move.

“Do you want to help me with this dance number?” I asked her.

Nailed it. It wasn’t even a lie, either. Ursula and I hadn’t exactly mastered it this morning. I could

use the practice.

“You want to dance with me?” she questioned. “Aren’t you supposed to be doing this number with

Ursula?”

I nodded. “I am, but she went out to lunch. I keep messing up this one sequence. Maybe you could

practice with me?” I extended a hand to her and gestured toward the open, vacant studio.

Her big blue eyes searched my face for a moment and then she put her hand in mine. “Sure. That

sounds fun.”

THE DANCE NUMBER wasn’t particularly difficult, just a modified foxtrot for the most part with a more

difficult sequence containing a few lifts and a kiss at the end, but Ursula and I had struggled this

morning. I just wasn’t feeling it with her (in so many ways). I didn’t like to think that I ever had the

‘two left feet’ problem, but the dance just didn’t come very naturally with her. I knew we’d get there

eventually, but it wasn’t there yet. The same wasn’t true for Ariel. It was like our bodies had been

made for each other and we’d just been waiting for the music.

Ariel floated over the floor like she was a spirit, gracefully turning and spinning as I led her

through the routine. She needed almost no instruction, picking up the steps almost as soon as I taught

them to her. She followed well, clearly having extensive experience at ballroom dance. Having her in

my arms felt fantastic. It was kind of like driving a tractor all morning to suddenly get an upgrade to a

Ferrari. Ariel was the luxury, high-performance vehicle of dance partners, and I was more than ready

to take her for a test drive.

Everywhere our bodies met felt electric. Her tiny hand was in mine and my other hand was on the

small of her back, having drifted there from her waist as we moved. I was probably holding her

closer than I needed to, and the disparity in our heights and strides suggested a wider dance frame, but

I couldn’t resist it. The way she looked up at me when she wasn’t spotting her turns made my heart

pound.

When we got to the lifts, I took my time walking her through the choreography without the music

playing. Ariel was shorter and lighter than Ursula, so the lifts were easier for both of us. Ariel also

seemed more experienced with them. For all of Ursula's dance training, she hadn't yet mastered the

technique of holding totally taut and still while being lifted. But lifting Ariel up by the waist and

watching her kick in the mirror did things to me that Ursula didn't manage. Touching her made me feel

lighter than air.

How were we so good together? It felt like Ariel and I had been made for this dance. When I'd

taught her all the choreography and turned the music on again, the number seemed to flow totally

naturally. It was a shame to think that Ariel would be wasted in the chorus line for this number. She

really belonged front and center.

Technically, she was excellent. At any point it was obvious that she knew exactly where her body

was in time and space. The awareness of one's body in dance is always essential, but especially

when dancing with a partner. When a ballerina swings her leg up over her face, she could as easily

kick herself in the nose if she doesn't have that control. Or, she might kick her partner in the face,

which would be even worse. It was clear to me that I would have no such problems with Ariel, and

so I danced better too. We floated through the number without errors on our first go around, a feat that

Ursula and I had not managed in almost four hours of rehearsal.

The number ended with an assisted pirouette and penché where Ariel turned over and over before

extending her back leg up past her head and I held her waist and steadied her. Then I flipped her,

putting her back over my knee and leaning down to kiss her. It was a very romantic, ballet-inspired

ending to the number, only sexier. Once I had her bent over my knee with her hand around my

shoulders and our faces inches apart, I couldn't resist it. I hadn't kissed Ursula in the rehearsals

today, it was unnecessary (and unwanted). But I was going to kiss Ariel.

Ariel froze in surprise when she realized what I was going to do. Time slowed down.

The sound of clapping pulled us out of our fantasy. We were no longer alone. Ursula was staring

at us and applauding sarcastically.

"Having fun?" she asked us, sneering.

11

ARIEL

I FELT like I'd just been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. One second I'd been dancing with

Derek, then he'd been almost kissing me, then I'd been ready to be kissed by him, and now I was

staring at a woman who could make or break my career like it was a nail. I wriggled awkwardly out

of Derek's embrace and swallowed hard.

I don't belong here.

This is not good. This is the opposite of good.

God, she looked so incredibly angry.

Her eyes focused on me like I'd just slapped her. Her skin was pale and the hand that was

grasping her cup of designer coffee was so tight that the liquid was bubbling up out of the lid and

dripping on the floor. Was she going to lunge at me like an angry lion? Could I take her in a fight?

Were they dating? What the heck was going on? Thoughts flew through my head faster than I could

sort through them and the entire time, Ursula just kept on staring.

"I asked Ariel here to help me with that last sequence," Derek said, straightening and looking

from Ursula's disapproving frown to my sheepish, guilty expression with a placid, totally neutral look

on his face. He didn't sound embarrassed. If anything, he sounded a bit annoyed. "You know the one I

kept missing this morning?"

Ursula raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

He nodded and pressed his dark hair back from his face. “Yes, I think I’ve got it down now,” he

replied. I couldn’t tell if he was at all concerned at being caught kissing a chorus girl for real. Maybe

he did that kind of thing all the time. I hoped that wasn’t the case, but it was certainly a possibility. I

didn’t know how to resist Derek, let alone whether I ought to be trying. But by Ursula’s expression,

I’d just crossed a serious line.

“Shall we give it a try?” Ursula asked, stepping forward and then between Derek and me. I

shuffled back awkwardly. It was probably my cue to leave. “No,” Ursula said, looking over her

shoulder when I tried to bolt. “Stay and watch. Let’s see if you helped warm him up.”

“Are you sure? We’re probably about to—” I said, gesturing toward the door.

Warm him up? Gross.

“No,” Ursula said again, snapping out the word from between deep red lips and a furrowed brow.

“I think we’ll do better with an audience. Maybe that’s what we needed all along.”

Derek seemed at a loss.

“Ursula—” he warned, looking at me with an undecipherable look on his handsome features. “Let

her go. I don’t want to get her in trouble.”

She laughed lightly. “Come on, Derek. Don’t be silly. If you wanted to practice with me, you

should have just asked. You didn’t need to go grab some random chorus girl.”

“She’s not—”

I shook my head at Derek. *Don’t defend me*, I begged him with my eyes. *You’re only going to*

make it worse for me.

He must have gotten the picture because he frowned and fell silent. Ursula could easily get me

fired. All she had to do was look at me wrong and she’d get me canned. I hadn’t realized she was this

jealous or possessive of Derek, but apparently, I’d made a big mistake.

Ursula took the remote from his pocket and turned the music on. All I could do was stand back at

watch. I settled in nervously.

The music started and they started to dance. Ursula was good. At least as good as I was, probably

better. She was taller than me, curvier, and much, much sexier. She and Derek went through the

routine focused entirely on one another and making me feel like I was the one who had interrupted

something private. I felt like I should leave. This was their intimate moment. Derek had just been

dancing with me to tide him over until Ursula returned, and I'm sure he just got carried away with that

kiss at the end. After all, it was an easy thing to do…

By the time the final steps came and the kiss at the end, I was mortified. What had I been thinking?

Ursula was obviously the star of this show. Not me. I shouldn't pretend differently, not even in my

mind. She kissed him like he belonged to her, holding him for a long time as the music cut to nothing. I

looked down, ready to be anywhere else but here.

Watching these two lock lips was going to happen a lot on this movie. I might as well get used to

it. But for some reason it made my heart swell with jealousy to even consider it. Which was, of

course, totally ridiculous. I had no claim on him. He certainly wasn't mine and never would be. He

belonged with someone like her—someone on his level.

"Well, aren't you even going to clap?" Ursula asked when she finally pulled away.

I clapped on reflex, even though I wanted to cry. I banged my hands together and tried to decipher

the look on Derek's face. I couldn't. But deciphering Ursula's didn't take any effort at all. She was

pissed, and I couldn’t really piss off Ursula. I needed her. She needed me too or, at least, she needed

my voice. But it was obvious to me now that she wasn’t going to let me near Derek again.

“I should really get back to my rehearsal,” I said, looking at the clock. “We’re starting up again in

five minutes.”

“I’ll walk you back,” Ursula said, leaving Derek standing looking confused in the center of the

studio. “I need to grab some water.”

As we walked down the hallway side by side, I prayed she wouldn’t say anything else. She’d

made her point. But I guess she hadn’t rubbed it in enough because she stopped me from opening the

door to the chorus girl rehearsal space and got right up in my face.

“I trust I’ve made my point with you,” she said. “I’m really doing you a favor.”

“A favor?” I asked. I managed not to sound disgusted, but only barely. She was throwing her

weight around. While I knew that was her prerogative, I thought it was a bit low to act like she was

some kind of altruist about it. She wanted Derek. Because she was a famous movie star, she’d get to

have him. How that benefited me was a mystery. “How so?”

“He’s had a lot of pretty little chorus girls,” Ursula said, laughing lightly and pressing a curl that

had escaped my bun back behind my ear. I recoiled at the personal contact and she only laughed

harder. “While he might notice when you’re around, I can assure you he doesn’t remember you when

you aren’t. You utterly cease to exist when I’m in the room with him.”

I didn’t reply. I just stared at her. Was that true about Derek? Did he sleep with all the chorus

girls? I hated the idea that Derek only wanted to sleep with me, although another tiny, slutty part was

excited by the prospect. My thoughts were all jumbled up. He seemed nice. Normal even.

Or as normal as someone who was born a billionaire and became a movie star could possibly be.

And he was so. Damn. Good looking. Being in close proximity to him was turning me into someone I

didn’t recognize.

“You’ll only be embarrassed if you let him seduce you,” Ursula said when I didn’t reply. “And

you don’t want to mess with me, either. You’ll only get your face broken if you try fighting above your

weight class,” she told me. “Be smart. I know this is your first production, so it’s probably a lot to

take in. Take some good advice and keep your knees together. Derek Prince is going to be mine soon,

but until he figures that out, he’s definitely not going to be yours.”

“I don’t think—”

“You’re right,” she interrupted. “You clearly don’t think. Go read your contract. It says you’ll do

nothing to compromise my public image. I want Derek. He’ll be good for my image. Therefore, you

can’t have him. How about you think about that.” Her voice was tart and her expression was plainly

threatening.

I don’t take well to being threatened, but I had no response to that. Actually, I did, but it was so

profane that I somehow managed to stifle it. I took the high road and just got myself out of the situation

before I could do something really stupid, like slap Ursula.

I walked inside my rehearsal room and found that everyone was already in there. I was late.

Everyone stared at me, and Mia regarded me with disappointment.

“Why don’t you go ahead and join group two for now Ariel,” she told me. “Try and be on time,

please.”

Flo and Jess waved to me cattily as I took my new position in the back. I smiled back at them with

an optimism that I had to manufacture. Lucky for me, their lack of confidence in me fueled my own.

I could still fix this. I could still do this. I would succeed on this production. I'd survive Ursula. I

would do it all, because I had to. Failure was not an option.

I'd even figure out Derek. It seemed like he genuinely liked me. I'd be a huge fool to shy away

from that. My sixteen-year-old self would kill me if I did. Besides, the surest way to make me do

something was to tell me I couldn't do it. Him. Whatever.

Thanks Ursula, I thought to myself as I watched group one and picked out the weakest dancer; the

one I had to beat to get back where I belonged . *You can have my voice, but you can't have Derek. I*

know what my contract says, and it had nothing in it about avoiding Derek. I'm going to make him

mine and you can just deal.

12

DEREK

I HAD a production meeting with Clint for dinner that night. He was late. After the long day I'd had on

set rehearsing with Ursula, I was exhausted and honestly a bit annoyed. I knew Clint was a busy guy,

but come on. I was busy too. I had things to do like rehearsing, obsessing over whether I'd ever hear

from Ariel again after Ursula's power move, and dropping by Sebastian's in the hopes of seeing her.

But instead, I was waiting on his ass.

Why he'd insisted on Estrella, an over-wrought and ridiculously romantic Italian restaurant, was

also a mystery. This was 'the date place' right now. I'd already seen one proposal while I was

waiting. It seemed like a very weird place for a business meeting, although I'd heard the clam

linguine was revelatory. It had better be. It was the only thing I had to look forward to because Clint

wasn't here and being here alone made me feel depressed and chronically single.

I ordered my food without him and munched on it petulantly while I waited. I finally manifested

some courage and texted Ariel.

Derek Prince [7:25 p.m.]: Hey. Sorry for the weirdness this afternoon with Ursula. I didn't mean to

make things awkward for you. She can be quite a handful.

Ariel Cross [7:27 p.m.]: It wasn't your fault. At least I learned to avoid her.

Derek Prince [7:28 p.m.]: What are you up to right now? Want to go grab hamburgers again?

Ariel Cross [7:29 p.m.]: I can't. I'm right in the middle of a science experiment.

Derek Prince [7:30 p.m.]: A science experiment?

Ariel Cross [7:30 p.m.]: What do you think of my new look?

I felt my jaw hit the floor. She texted me a picture of herself . A very special picture of herself. A

very sexy, half-naked picture of herself.

In the picture, Ariel was wrapped tightly in a towel. The towel was covering her up, but barely.

Her skin was still flushed from a shower. The hesitant look in her eyes and sexy tilt of her smile took

my breath away. Her ample cleavage was on full display. She was just one little slip away from being

wet and naked on my phone. I considered her question long and hard (literally).

Derek Prince [7:31 p.m.]: You're a bit overdressed.

Ariel Cross [7:32 p.m.]: Uh-huh. I meant the hair. I'm going to find out if blondes have more fun.

Oh. Right. Her hair was no longer dark auburn, but a bright, shiny platinum blonde. I'd missed

that. I'd been focused on… other things. She knew what she was doing. I lost all interest in my salad.

Derek Prince [7:32 p.m.]: It's nice. The color really suits you. Can I have another picture?

Ariel Cross [7:33 p.m.]: Of my hair?

Derek Prince [7:34 p.m.]: Of anything yours.

I was, naturally, hoping for a picture without the towel. I received a picture without the towel a

moment later. Unfortunately, it was not a picture of Ariel. It was a picture of a parrot. It was a very

nice, very large blue and yellow parrot. Not what I wanted at all. Funny though.

Derek Prince [7:35 p.m.]: That's a macaw unless I'm mistaken. You have a pet bird?

Ariel Cross [7:35 p.m.]: Technically this is my uncle's pet bird, Flapper. He's an asshole by the way.

Derek Prince [7:35 p.m.]: I wanted a picture of you.

Ariel Cross [7:35 p.m.]: You said anything mine.

Derek Prince [7:35 p.m.]: I meant you.

Ariel Cross [7:35 p.m.]: Well if you zoom in really, really close in, I'm totally naked in the reflection

in his eye.

Of course, I tried it, but Ariel was just messing with me. I felt foolish for trying.

Derek Prince [7:36 p.m.]: No fair.

Ariel Cross [7:36 p.m.]: If you want a picture of me, you send one of you back first. Even movie stars

have to play by the rules here.

Derek Prince [7:36 p.m.]: I'm a bit out of practice with the dating rules.

Ariel Cross [7:37 p.m.]: Are you? I heard you were seeing Ursula. She said you were hers, and that I

should stay away if I knew what was good for me.

Derek Prince [7:38 p.m.]: That’s not true. Is that really what she told you?

Ariel Cross [7:39 p.m.]: Don’t worry. I hate bullies. The more someone tells me not to do something,

the more I want to do it. So here I am sending you half naked pictures of myself. Which you haven’t

reciprocated, by the way.

Derek Prince [7:40 p.m.]: Remind me to thank Ursula for that. I’m not dating her. I swear. And I’m

sorry she threatened you. That wasn’t very nice, but as you may have seen, neither is she. If it makes

you feel any better, she’s like that with everyone. If you aren’t an A-list star, you’re basically a

cockroach to Ursula.

Ariel Cross [7:41 p.m.]: I’m glad you’re not seeing her.

Derek Prince [7:42 p.m.]: Me too.

Ariel Cross [7:43 p.m.] I’m not getting my picture, am I?

Derek Prince [7:45 p.m.]: Give me a second. Don’t send me a picture of you without that towel in the

meantime.

Ariel Cross [7:46 p.m.]: Nice try, but I’m not that gullible. I’m waiting.

I was about to get up and go to the bathroom to take one when Oliver, Clint’s assistant, finally

arrived. But Clint wasn’t with him. Ursula was. I froze.

No. Not more Ursula. I'd already had about twelve hours of Ursula today. I'd reached my

absolute limit on Ursula.

"Derek!" she crowed, loudly enough that people looked over from their tables and stared. "I'm so

sorry I'm late. I didn't mean to keep you waiting, sweetheart."

She kissed me on the cheek and sat down next to me in the narrow booth. I stared at Oliver, who

shrugged. The look on his face said it all. I bet he invited the paparazzi here too. I could almost

guarantee it. In fact, as I scanned the room, I saw Meg Butler. She was a notorious gossip/paparazzo

type. So, basically a villain. The fact that the studio consorted with her was a bit disgusting, but

whatever. They apparently had no standards.

After all, they thought setting up two actors on a public date when we weren't dating was an okay

thing to do.

Ursula was dressed to the nines. She was wearing a low-cut velvet dress, diamonds, and enough

makeup that she probably left a carbon copy on any pillow she laid on. She might have looked good,

except that I kind of hated her, so it was hard to tell. I'd been mildly ambivalent before. But after her

little stunt today with Ariel, I was all out of patience.

This was a setup. The whole meeting was a setup to trap me. There would be no production

decisions made here today. The studio wanted me seen in public with Ursula and barring me just

getting up and leaving like an asshole, I was now stuck here with her. Little did they know, I had no

problem being an asshole when properly motivated. Ariel was waiting on me. That was motivating.

“Where’s Clint?” I asked Oliver.

“He had an emergency,” he replied. “He suggested you and Ursula spend the evening together

instead.”

“Oh really?”

Oliver nodded. “You two have fun,” Oliver said, shaking my hand as I glared at him. His boss

was going to get an earful about this from me. “See you later.”

He took off quickly, probably correctly interpreting the face that I was making. He was toast. Clint

had fucked up royally by going behind my back, even if it was on the studio’s orders. In Hollywood

relationships count for a lot and he’d just destroyed his with me. My agent would ensure that he was

never attached to another of my projects, at the very least.

“So,” Ursula said, turning up the charm, “what are we eating for dinner?” She batted her eyes at

me.

I’d been lured here under false pretenses, but Ursula either didn’t know or didn’t care. She smiled

sweetly at me and took a sip of my wine. She could have it. I wouldn’t be staying.

“I’m sorry, Ursula,” I told her. “I’ve already eaten. I just got an urgent text, too. A family

emergency.”

“I am sorry to be late,” she told me. “But surely you can stay for one drink —”

I shook my head and stood up. “I really can’t. Sorry. See you at tomorrow’s rehearsal.”

Walking away felt great. What felt even better was walking outside and seeing Oliver still waiting

for his studio limo to pick him up. He gaped at me and I grinned a particularly shit-eating grin back at

him.

“Where are you going?” he asked, obviously shocked that I’d just gotten up and left. I’d hear

about this tomorrow. I knew I would. I didn’t much care.

The car that Oliver was waiting for arrived then, saving me from a long explanation he didn’t

deserve anyway. I got into it, effectively stealing it from him. I was still a movie star and that trumped

studio peon any day. He could call another one.

“Somewhere else,” I told him, shaking my head. “Don’t ever pull that shit again with me. Tell

your boss his plan backfired and now Ursula’s in there looking jilted. Just like Clint, I had an

emergency come up. I suggest you go back in there and eat with her. Otherwise it’ll look like I ditched

her.” His face was precious. “What? You don’t want to endure two hours of Ursula?” He obviously

didn’t. “Well, that’s just karma, isn’t it?”

I closed the door in his face.

“Where to?” the driver asked. I looked down at my phone.

Derek Prince [7:52 p.m.]: Are you sure you can’t go out tonight?

Ariel Cross [7:52 p.m.]: I really can’t. My uncle needs me to waitress tonight. His other waitress

called out.

Derek Prince [7:53 p.m.]: Can I come by Sebastian’s and hang out with you?

Ariel Cross [7:54 p.m.]: Only if you promise not to distract me.

“Sebastian’s,” I told the driver. “It’s a karaoke bar in west Hollywood.”

He nodded like he knew it.

Derek Prince [7:54 p.m.]: No promises.

13

DEREK

SEBASTIAN’S WAS A FASCINATING PLACE. The last time I’d been here it had been with Ursula, queen of

under-the-table hand and thigh grabbing, so I hadn’t had much ability to look around. But I’d really

missed out. This place was awesome.

It was busy too. There were a lot of happy, drinking, singing patrons in the bar tonight. No

bachelorette parties tonight either, thankfully. The whole place had a festive, excited feeling. It might

not be the fabled rock club of old, but it was certainly a happening place. Right now, a man wearing a

full-on Elvis costume was belting out ‘Love Me Tender’ with a Vegas flair. The audience was loving

it. He was actually pretty good, although he probably should have included a wig with his costume.

Elvis never had a bald spot, even when his middle-aged paunch was about at the singing man’s level.

Memorabilia lined the walls, effectively chronicling the movers and shakers of Hollywood from

the mid-seventies to the early nineties. Everyone who mattered was on a wall somewhere in the tiny

bar. There were a lot of pictures of young movie stars with various models, loads of hair metal bands,

and plenty of suit-wearing studio heads that looked like they were trying their very hardest to be hip.

My favorite photo was one of Elton John playing the piano with a curiously familiar looking blue and

yellow parrot on his shoulder while Barbara Streisand and Mel Brooks sang. That must have been a

hell of a number.

“They were singing ‘Happy Birthday’,” a man said to me, coming up to my shoulder. “It was

Flapper’s fifth year on this blue marble. He was just a little hatchling back then.”

The man in front of me looked like Satan, and I could see the same man—only younger—in a

bunch of the photos hung throughout the bar. “You must be Sebastian.”

“I am indeed Sebastian.” He grinned. “Ariel told me we were having a VIP guest tonight. I can’t

offer you a table—we’re totally booked up—but I thought I’d come say hi.”

We shook hands. Sebastian didn’t look much like his niece.

“Did you raise Ariel?”

He shook his head. “No, not at all. She grew up in Sacramento with her parents. She just moved

up here for college.” He chuckled. “But she’s much more like me than her dad, my brother. I love

having her around though. My husband, Spencer, died a few years ago and she’s been a godsend.”

I wanted to ask him more questions about her but settled for the most important one.

“What did Ariel tell you about me?” I asked.

He shook his head at me. “Oh, not much. But I think she likes you.” He winked. “I hope you’re

worth it.” Sebastian reminded me of a very friendly, very gay devil. I liked him immediately. He was

part of a vanishing generation of older Hollywood types who just didn’t give two shits about

anything, although it was clear that he cared about Ariel.

“I like her too,” I told him.

A lot. A whole lot. More than I wanted to admit, even to myself. I’d spent the entire drive over

here obsessing about what to say to her when I arrived. And I’d come up empty handed. I still had no

idea what to say to her.

“Well, as long as you’re good to her, that’s just fine,” Sebastian said, examining my face for

something. I wasn’t sure whether his expression was satisfied or just amused at whatever he found.

“My niece is over there mixing drinks right now,” he told me, nodding towards Ariel at the bar. She

hadn’t seen me yet. I stared longingly at her. “I think you should go surprise her and sing her a song.”

I ripped my gaze away from Ariel and back to her uncle. That was an interesting suggestion.

Hmm. Not a bad idea. I could sing my feelings at her better than I could say them anyway. Then I

wouldn't need to find the words.

"What does she like?" I asked, looking at the karaoke stage. "And when did you become a

karaoke bar anyway?"

Sebastian laughed. "The worst decade of all, the nineties. First, the proper rock scene collapsed.

Then the big record labels all started chasing Grunge music up in Seattle. Finally, some douche from

the city fined me a ton of money for having a live bird in an eating establishment. It was a sad time,

but whatever." He shook his head. "Oh, and Ariel? She likes power ballads."

I like power ballads too. They're fun. Impressive to sing and exciting to listen to.

"Foreigner?" I suggested. I could do 'I Want to Know What Love Is.' That should get her attention.

Plus, it worked thematically.

He shrugged and regarded me like a casting director. "A bit lackluster for a man of your talents,

don't you think?"

I frowned. I supposed he'd seen plenty of first-rate acts. He ought to be able to size up talent

about as well as anyone after all these years. "Is it too easy?" I asked.

He nodded seriously. If he thought it was too easy, then I guess it was. “Challenge yourself, man.

You want to *impress* her, don’t you?”

I nodded. Yes, I did. Challenge myself? Sure. Why not.

“Heart? How about ‘Alone’?” I suggested.

Those high notes would be challenging enough, but I didn’t think the message was quite right.

He shook his head and his earring jingled. “Eh. Try again. Heart just doesn’t seem like it would

be the right choice for your voice.”

Sebastian, or maybe it was Ariel, had extremely high standards. I didn’t want to disappoint either

of them. After all, I didn’t want Sebastian telling Ariel I wasn’t invested or just phoning it in.

“What do you suggest for me to sing? She’s your niece. You know her better than I do.”

He looked me up and down. “What’s your highest comfortable note?”

I blinked. “A4.”

He cocked his head to the side and squinted at me. His eyes were a vivid, bright green, like a cat.

Or maybe a demon. “*Not cold*,” he said. His voice was incredulous. “What’s your highest

comfortable note without warming up first?”

“A4,” I said confidently.

An eyebrow crept toward his hairline. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” I was sure I could do it. Cold or not, that note was entirely in my range. I’d been

singing professionally for fifteen years. I knew my limits. Relatively. I wasn’t usually this nervous.

He raised an eyebrow. “So, you are ambitious. How about something by Celine Dion?”

Nice choice. I loved me some Celine Dion. I mean, who didn’t? Fools, that’s who. Tasteless

fools.

“The Power of Love,” I answered. The answer was obvious. If this song didn’t impress Ariel,

nothing ever could. “What do you think?”

Satan—I mean Sebastian—grinned. “I think that would be just perfect. Follow me.”

Sebastian led me to a hallway that circumvented the main room and led to the back of the house.

He punched a couple of buttons on a machine and handed me a microphone. I accepted it with

unsteady hands. Had I seriously just agreed to sing one of the hardest pop songs ever written to

impress a girl in front of a bunch of people with smartphones? Sebastian laughed at my expression.

“Get out there and knock her socks off,” he told me.

I swallowed my fear and put a big smile on my face. I didn’t get that kiss this afternoon. I was

going to get it now.

“I’ll certainly try.”

14

ARIEL

WHEN THE FIRST few bars of ‘The Power of Love’ played over the speakers, I shuddered and looked

over at the empty karaoke stage.

Here we go again.

My poor ears. Nobody ever did this song justice. I’d literally never heard it done well. Usually

the people who picked it were either comically drunk or tragically overconfident. Oftentimes they

were both. The closest I’d ever heard the song done well was when an eight-year-old with a lisp sang

it at a birthday party. At least that was cute.

There were a handful of songs that fell into that category in general, the group of songs that should

not be sung by amateurs in karaoke settings. I wished they would just take them out of the catalogues.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow was another song that was beyond the reach of the average person.

Nobody sounds like freakin’ Judy Garland. Nobody. Unchained Melody was another. The Righteous

Brothers owned that song. Oh, and anything by Meatloaf was the same way. The day I heard someone

competently cover any Meatloaf song I would hang up my apron forever and admit I knew nothing

about karaoke, singing, music, or life.

But every time somebody picked ‘The Power of Love,’ it was always a good show, even if it was

a cringy one. I pushed back from the bar and waited for the poor, dumb shmuck to shuffle out and

destroy a perfectly great piece of music. Then Derek Prince stepped out on stage and looked right at

me.

My knees went weak and I gripped the edge of the bar to stay upright. Gravity betrayed me in an

instant and I struggled to fight against it.

I wasn’t cringing anymore. He was still looking right at me. I swallowed, listening to his velvet-

smooth voice build up to the bridge, which he’d conveniently gender-swapped to make it more

appropriate. That was talent right there. He didn’t even look at the cue lyrics. He had it memorized.

The room was full of people, but they might have well dissolved into smoke. I couldn’t see

anything but Derek. He was singing to me. Just me. We were utterly alone.

And he didn’t even stay up on the stage like he was supposed to. He wandered out into the crowd,

making his way slowly through a stunned room. It wasn’t exactly every day that we had a world-class

singer on the stage anymore. Somewhere around here, I’m sure Sebastian was taking it all in stride.

But for me, this was heart-stopping.

He was singing only to me. I couldn’t do anything but watch and listen. I didn’t have a chance to

resist him. I didn’t even try.

'Cause you’re my lady

And I am your man

Whenever you reach for me

I'll do all that I can

We're heading for something

Somewhere I've never been

Sometimes I am frightened

But I'm ready to learn

Of the power of love

If I hadn’t been in love with the man since I was a teenager, I would be now. I was totally

outclassed by him. I was woefully unprepared and incredibly eager. I was ready to fall. I'd never

been so ready for anything in my life. Derek Prince sang his sexy way into my heart and now I was

going to have to reckon with what that meant. Even if it meant disaster.

Although he was staring right at me, he took his sweet time making it over to the bar. He spent the

entire song cutting through the audience. It felt like foreplay. By the time he was nearing me the song

was at its climax. The song didn't leave him winded at all. He was totally in control of it, as if he'd

practiced it a thousand times.

He rounded the back of the bar singing, clearly not caring that he wasn't supposed to be back

here. I didn't have anywhere to run, although that implies that I might have wanted to try. The crowd

was going wild, but they had nothing on my crazed heartbeat.

He drifted closer and closer. I was as frozen as a deer in the headlights. He grabbed my hand. He

had the same look on his face now that he had earlier this afternoon when we almost kissed. Was he

going to kiss me? The last note rang into silence and applause and cheers went crazy. Derek leaned

closer. I felt myself give in.

Then someone took a photo with a super-bright flash and ruined it.

15

DEREK

MEG BUTLER, trashy paparazzo, stalker, and general pain in the ass, had followed me to Sebastian’s.

She brought her big-ass camera too. She sat back on the barstool, having ruined my damn-near perfect

moment, and smirked insolently. The woman had been a thorn in the side of the Prince family several

times over recent months. First, she’d contributed to the media harassment my uncle Connor

underwent. Then she all but tortured my brother’s girlfriend, Cindy. Apparently, it was my turn. Lucky

me.

“Cute song. Cute girl. Thanks for the photo,” she said, standing up and smoothing her hair back.

“Care to comment as well? You walk out on a date with a very unhappy looking Ursula Jones and

come here to serenade a waitress? Surely you have something to say about that?”

I swallowed hard. Ariel was staring at me. Her expression was confused and betrayed.

“No comment from me,” I said.

Meg turned to Ariel. “How about you, sweetheart?” she asked. “Anything to say about this?”

Ariel was standing at my side and she shook her head, looking lost. Her look toward me was full

of questions.

“Are you sure?” Meg asked.

“She has no comment either,” I insisted. “Leave her alone.”

“Not a chance,” Meg said. She looked back at me. “Toodaloo!” She took off toward the exit.

My brain was starting to come back to reality. The pieces came together slower than I wanted

them to, but when they did, it wasn’t pretty. Not at all. I had a problem.

Meg Butler had a picture of me almost kissing a woman that was not Ursula. She’d just been at

Estrella. The studio had tipped her off that we were dating. Because she was a lot smarter than the

average gossipmonger, I’m sure she had captured pictures of me looking less than enthused about

seeing Ursula, rather than just the shot of her kissing me. That gave her a story—Derek the two-timing

asshole who went out with two women in one night. It was right out of her playbook to smear the

innocent for personal profit.

Crap. I really needed to clean this up fast.

“Wait,” I said, following her. Meg took one look over her shoulder and started walking faster.

“Wait,” I repeated. “I need a word with you.”

“No.”

“Are you really going to ruin that girl’s life in there?”

Meg looked over her shoulder at me. For a second I thought I saw guilt. “Not my problem.”

“She didn’t do anything. She’s innocent,” I told Meg. “Your story here isn’t true, but she’ll lose

her job working on a movie if you publish that photo and Ursula retaliates against her.”

“Not my problem. She has a job here. She won’t starve.”

“Wait,” I said, overtaking her and getting between her and her car. “I have one other question.”

She blinked and turned around. We were in the parking lot now. Meg was about to climb into a

car that looked like it was one pothole away from giving up the ghost. Apparently, the sleazy gossip

business wasn’t a particularly well-paid venture. That felt like justice to me.

“You can’t stop me from publishing this,” she told me, gesturing down at her camera. “You were

in a bar. It’s a public place and you’re a public figure. There’s no expectation of privacy in a bar.”

I didn’t need a refresher course on privacy practices in the state of California. I certainly didn’t

need a lecture from Meg Butler.

I felt myself glaring at her. “I’m not trying to stop you,” I snapped. “Just listen to me for a moment,

will you?”

“Why?” she asked. “You’ve come up with a comment?”

“Better,” I bit out, thinking quickly. “I’ve come up with a deal.”

Meg blinked at me and then her eyes narrowed. “What kind of a deal?”

I took a deep breath. I already regretted what I was about to say, and I hadn’t even said it aloud

yet. “What if I can offer you something that’s more valuable than this stupid photo? Would you be

interested?” I felt ill.

Her mouth fell open in surprise and then closed into a thin line. “My photo isn’t stupid,” she

insisted. “I can sell this,” she said, and I wondered if she wasn’t trying to convince herself. “I’ve got

a story.”

“Do you want to hear the deal or not?” I asked Meg, feeling like I was selling something that

didn’t belong to me.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m listening.”

“You’ve heard about my uncle Connor’s, um, big news?”

I felt like a bad person for even bringing it up. But I had to. This secret was about to be out soon

anyway. I knew it was circulating. We could either control the narrative or suffer the consequences.

Poor Connor. He was a drama magnet.

Meg's eyes went huge. "It's true?"

"I can't tell you that myself," I said carefully, "But, if it were, what if I could get you a sit down?"

She swallowed hard. I could see the idea become amenable to her. Her focus narrowed and her

face became eager rather than skeptical. "Exclusive?"

"Naturally."

"*With everyone involved*?" she asked. Her eyes were wide, and she was listening eagerly.

"Yes."

I was a bad person.

"Can we have the baby there, too?"

"Very unlikely," I replied. "And there's nothing I can do about that."

God, this was going to be such a hard sell for my uncle. He hated Meg. But he was family. He'd

help me.

"I guess I can live with that," Meg said. "I wouldn't want my kid out there either, I suppose." The

idea of Meg caring for a child was a bit terrifying. She shouldn't be allowed anywhere near children.

Too unethical.

“Are you interested?” I asked.

“Of course, I’m interested,” she said. I could see the wheels turning in her head. The woman was

a snake, but she wasn’t a stupid snake. She was the dangerous kind. The smart kind. “But I need

assurances.”

“What?” I asked warily. I didn’t have anything to offer her now except my word.

“Paperwork. I’ll hold this photo for three days,” Meg said. “But if I don’t get paperwork for an

exclusive before then, this will hit. We must negotiate the whole thing by then. You should call your

lawyer right now.”

“Deal,” I stuck out my hand.

She stared at it warily and then shook her head. “It’s not a deal until we have a deal. Right now,

all you have is a temporary reprieve.”

“Fine.” I sighed. “Thank you for the reprieve. I really do appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” She blinked at me. Just for a second, I thought a saw a conscience peeking

through her steely exterior. Then she sneered. “But put up or shut up, Derek Prince. I’m not here to

make friends.”

She took off then, climbing into her tiny, shitty car and starting it up. The engine turned over so

many times I thought it might not start. The battery must be going. But eventually it worked, sputtering

to life reluctantly and making a horrible screeching noise as she drove away. It looked like it was

rusting away too, not that I cared. The sooner Meg Butler ended up on public transportation where it

would be harder for her to stalk me, the better.

I had to get on with my lawyer then, and after that my uncle Connor, and then my lawyer again.

None of these were pleasant conversations, and before I knew it, hours had gone by. When I walked

back inside, Ariel's expression was surprised. She must have thought I took off. Her face was full of

questions and skepticism, and I don't doubt that mine was full of guilt. The night was pretty well

ruined now. I walked over to the bar and ordered a beer from her.

16

ARIEL

"HERE'S YOUR BEER," I said, sliding it across the bar and wondering what the hell was going on. My

mind was swimming, and I'd now been simmering for hours. Somehow, I'd managed to avoid sending

him a weird desperate text. "I didn't think you'd be back tonight."

“I’m sorry, I had to make a few calls,” he said, looking genuinely contrite. “I never left. I didn’t

mean to leave you waiting though.”

I shrugged my shoulders, pretending that I hadn’t been obsessing for hours. “I had plenty of work

to do. But now if you don’t mind, I would really like an explanation.”

I was mostly confused, but also a bit irked. He said he wasn’t dating Ursula. That didn’t appear to

be totally true. And now people were taking pictures of me? This was not a good ending to an already

weird, long, difficult day. The only tiny silver lining was that it was so late now that the bar had

mostly emptied out enough that we could actually talk.

“That woman that was in here—” Derek started.

“Meg Butler?” I interrupted. This was not my first encounter with the beautiful, frightening little

brunette.

Derek’s eyebrows shot up. “You know her?”

I nodded reluctantly. “She rented this space a while back while shooting a reality show. She

seems mean.”

Derek blinked. “Right. That’s right. She would have been involved in that trashy show Beauty

Queens Go West that my brother's girlfriend got all mixed up in." He paused. "And mean might not be

the right word...exactly. She's just doing what she does for a living. That's like saying a shark is

mean. A shark is a shark."

"Well, I think sharks are awful and I think she's awful for skulking around and taking pictures of

us," I said, feeling like this situation was already out of control, and I hadn't even kissed the man yet.

Frustration bubbled up in me like someone was shaking a bottle of champagne. Much more and I'd

blow my top. "How do you know her?"

"Unfortunately, most everyone famous in this town has had at least a few run-ins with her. She

seems to have taken a special interest in my family." He looked unhappy about the situation.

"Hmm." I wasn't particularly happy either. "I see."

"I'm not seeing Ursula," Derek promised me, looking at my face and then leaning forward to grab

my hand. "I really, truly, am not."

I frowned, looking down at our joined hands and feeling like I would be foolish to believe him. I

pulled my hand away reluctantly. "You say that, but Ursula says you are, and Meg says you are..." I

sighed. “I don’t want to be in the middle of something. I don’t want to be on the news, either. You

know that Ursula could get me fired in two seconds, or worse. I can’t take this kind of risk with my

career. I’m just getting started.”

“You won’t be on the news,” Derek promised. “I took care of that.”

“She agreed to destroy the picture?” I asked.

“Sort of.” He rubbed his temples like he was developing a headache. I knew the feeling. My head

was bothering me too, and my feet were on fire.

“What do you mean sort of?” I asked. “Did she delete half the picture or something?”

He looked at me and his expression was the definition of frustrated. I felt like there was

something he wasn’t telling me and that made me feel even worse. “I promise you that picture won’t

get published or back to Ursula,” he said eventually.

We stared at one another for a moment and I got the feeling he was hoping I was going to drop it. I

wasn’t going to drop it.

“But I don’t understand,” I told him. “What does it matter if it did get back to her? If you aren’t

seeing her then it doesn’t matter. None of this makes any sense.”

Derek sighed. “The movie studio wants Ursula and me to be a couple for publicity reasons.”

I blinked. “Okay, well that’s not that complicated. And what about her? She wants the two of you

to be a couple for personal reasons?”

“Right.”

“And you were just out on a date with her?” I probed. This was the part of the conversation that

was the most troubling to me. Derek told me his plans fell through.

“No. I wasn’t.” Derek ran a hand through his hair in obvious annoyance. “I was set up on a date

with her without my knowledge or consent. I had a meeting with someone from the studio, but he

didn’t show up. Instead, his personal assistant showed up with Ursula and dropped her off at the table

with me like it was some kind of blind date. He’d even taken the extra step of summoning the press to

come witness us out together. Apparently, movies perform a lot better when the romantic costars

appear to be genuinely in love. As if we can’t just, you know, act.”

I nibbled on my bottom lip. “So, you just ditched her to come here?”

He laughed. “That’s exactly what I did.” Then his expression turned serious. “I was annoyed at

being manipulated. But I did not think to consider the possibility that Meg might follow me and then

get snap-happy with her camera to create some kind of story about me two-timing Ursula with you."

I took a deep breath. He ditched a fake date with Ursula that she wanted to be a real date to come

see me. That felt pretty good. Great actually. It meant that what Ursula said about Derek forgetting I

exist when she's there wasn't true. But there was a larger problem.

"Ursula isn't going to give up that easily. Neither is the studio. Neither is Meg."

"I'm giving Meg something else shiny to chase after." He seemed less than enthused about the

prospect.

I stared at him. "What could be juicier than a movie star spending his nights slumming it with

some dumb chorus girl? Or walking out on his A-list costar?"

"You aren't some dumb chorus girl."

"Sure I am." I shook my head. "I would have to be if I believed a thing that you're telling me." I

wouldn't be made a fool, not even if it bought me moments alone with Derek. My pride just couldn't

take it. "You don't want to be seen in public with me."

"It's not that."

"Of course, it is." I swallowed. "At least partially. Look, I'll make it easy for you. It's fine. Don't

feel like you have to explain. I'll see you around."

He blinked at me. "I—"

I shook my head. "No. It's better if we just be friends. Or friendly acquaintances. Not… anything

else."

He looked at me with an expression I couldn't decipher. "You don't believe me."

He was damn right I didn't. There were things he wasn't telling me. I wasn't born yesterday. I

knew there was more to this story. "I just need to protect myself. It's clearly not the right time." I

swallowed. "You should go."

I wanted to believe that there was a way for us to, I don't know, date. To see if all this chemistry

was anything more than chemical. But it was too risky. I was on the verge of something. I'd traded my

voice for a chance at show business. Getting distracted by a guy like Derek Prince was probably a

huge mistake. And Derek Prince clearly had issues of his own. He was trying to satisfy the studio and

his pushy costar.

My body was telling me to run into his arms, but my brain was screaming to run the other

direction. Fear, attraction, and self-doubt fought for supremacy. The push and pull on my libido were

ripping me apart.

Ultimately, rationality won out. I didn’t want either one of us to end up regretting anything.

Only the look on Derek’s face made me regret it already.

“Really,” I told him. “You should go home. We’re closing soon.”

Derek shook his head and laid some cash on the bar. “Okay, Ariel. I’ll see you around.”

As he got up and gathered his things, my stupid heart got the best of me.

“I really liked the song,” I told him, unable to stop myself from saying it. “It was amazing.”

His smile was sad. “I’m sorry it wasn’t enough to win you over.”

My heart panged against my ribs. It was. It definitely was. But I couldn’t say that. I didn’t say

anything, and he walked away. I poured myself a drink when he was gone. The liquor did nothing to

make me feel better, but it did make me feel *less*. That was something, I supposed.

I wouldn’t be able to keep him. And how could anybody lose him and not lose their mind too? I

needed my mind if I was going to survive in this town. It was better to avoid temptation.

17

DEREK

ARIEL STAYED the hell away from me on set the next day, darting around corners and looking over

warily when she thought I wasn’t paying attention, but Ursula adhered to me like she was my shadow.

I couldn’t shake her. She cornered me as soon as she could and handed me a very familiar looking

picture. It was the one of Ariel and me from the night before. I felt my mouth drop open.

How?

“Don’t worry. I took care of it,” she told me, taking me by the elbow and pulling me into a corner.

I went along willingly for once. I couldn’t find the wherewithal to resist.

I stared at the picture, enraptured by it. It was a legitimately beautiful picture. The kind that

deserved to be on a magazine cover. Meg had an artistic eye. Aside from the subject matter, me

almost kissing Ariel like both our lives depended on it, the color and composition of the shot were

great. Ariel was so damn beautiful. Seeing the picture made me want to kiss her all over again,

although of course I couldn’t, because I was face to face with Ursula.

I blinked at her, confused. “What?”

“Meg Butler called me,” Ursula explained. Her expression was pitying. “She said your lawyers

were giving her the runaround. I guess she got cold feet because she reached out to me instead of

honoring her deal with you."

I winced. Meg was no fool. My uncle Connor had balked at the prospect of using a sit down with

Meg Butler as the way to expose his news. I got where he was coming from, but it created a real

problem for me. The negotiations had gotten heated and I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that

Meg would hedge her bets with Ursula. The more people she had at the end of a string, the stronger

her negotiating position.

"What did Meg ask you to do?" I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Ursula shook her head pityingly at me.

"Does it really matter? The point is that I took care of it," she said. "But you owe me now. I won't

be humiliated in the press. I spoke to the studio and we've come to an arrangement. We're going to

give Meg Butler what she wants."

"*What did you do*?"

She frowned. "I just promised her an exclusive of my own."

"An exclusive of what?"

"Us. At a party tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. You're going to be my arm candy for

the rest of this production.”

I swallowed. “I don’t want to go to a party, Ursula. I don’t want to be blunt but--”

“Be blunt,” she suggested. “I am and I find it works really well.”

“Fine,” I told her. “I don’t want to be with you. I don’t want to date you. You aren’t my type.

How’s that for blunt?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I get it. I’ve been getting it for weeks. But you haven’t been getting what

everyone around you has been trying to impress on you, either. We’re better off together than apart.

I’ve tried to be nice and ease you into the idea. I’ve tried to be charming and sweet. I’ve tried to make

this pleasant. But you clearly don’t want me. For whatever reason, you like that silly chorus girl more

than me. You have terrible taste. But the studio and I agree that it’s best for everyone’s career,

including hers, for you to be seen publicly with me. You went and created a media problem for us last

night. Now you’re going to get to clean it up.”

I swallowed hard. “This movie might be set in the nineteen thirties, but we’re not living there

anymore. It was almost a century ago. The studios can’t pair us up anymore.”

“This isn’t the studio,” Ursula said sweetly. “This is me blackmailing you.”

I laughed at her. “With what, exactly?”

“With Ariel’s continued participation on this film, obviously.”

I paused. “What? Are you serious?”

She smiled. “You like her, don’t you? Wouldn’t it be a shame if she were fired?”

“On what grounds?”

She shrugged. “That I don’t like her face? That she irritates me? That would be enough, because

the studio would support my decision. That’s all that matters.”

The idea that Ursula would have her rival fired was petty, disgusting, and entirely within her

character.

“Ursula, be reasonable.”

“I am reasonable. You won’t speak to her. You won’t go to her cute little karaoke bar. You won’t

kiss her. You won’t dance with her. She’s dead to you from here on out. She’s invisible. Got it?”

I frowned. “Ursula. This is irrational. She’s a human being.”

“It’s actually perfectly rational, you just don’t like it,” she insisted. I got the feeling that this was

the first genuine conversation I’d ever had with Ursula, and it wasn’t going well at all. Even when we

were being totally honest with one another, we were no closer to finding common ground.

“It doesn’t seem rational or reasonable to me. It seems like a childish attempt to hurt someone

who’s done nothing to you. You’re better than that.”

“You want to see what unreasonable looks like? Try me.”

“There’s no way we could even attempt to pretend to like one another after this.”

She shook her head at me. “Brush up on your acting skills, I guess. But I don’t care what happens

between us in private. Truth be told, you’re not exactly my cup of tea either. However, this is

Hollywood. Appearances are reality here, and so you and I are going to make a beautiful, picture

perfect couple until this movie comes out. Understand?”

“You’re actually serious about this, aren’t you?” I shook my head at her. “This is ridiculous. Using

Ariel as a pawn to manipulate me is revolting.”

“Maybe. But the studio likes the idea. And Meg Butler loved the idea of being a step ahead of the

rest of the press for a few weeks. Unless you’ve got something better to offer the bloodthirsty

paparazzi, some other pound of flesh, then I suggest you think about my plan.”

“Blackmailing your costar isn’t exactly professional behavior,” I told Ursula, attempting to appeal

to some semblance of professionalism. “Word will get out eventually.”

She shrugged. “Maybe so. But some of the biggest stars in Hollywood are some of the least

professional. Your brother denounced all of Hollywood as he received the Oscar for best actor. Your

uncle almost freakin’ murdered somebody. Your family isn’t exactly batting a thousand in this

department, so maybe get off your high horse.”

I took a deep breath before my temper could get out of hand. I needed to evaluate my options. It’s

not like Ariel wanted me. I’d been too weird, too cagey, too full of half-truths. The least I could do

now was to avoid wrecking her career. Ursula and Meg had me cornered. There was nothing I could

do.

“Fine,” I told Ursula. “I’ll play your game. But only because I want to protect Ariel from you.”

“She’s probably not the little doe-eyed innocent you think she is,” Ursula told me. “She’s out for

herself the same way we all are. I’m probably doing you a favor. For all you know, she’s the one that

called Meg last night.”

I shook my head at Ursula. “I barely even know the woman.”

“Great,” she replied. “Then you won’t mind not knowing her, will you?” She winked at me. “I’ll

send over the details of our media schedule for the next couple of weeks. My publicist will work with

yours, naturally. Oh, and don’t forget, if anybody asks you, I’m your new girlfriend and you adore

me.”

I couldn’t even come up with a snappy comeback. This was the worst-case scenario.

18

DEREK

A WEEK of rehearsals passed by, and every day was longer than the last. But it wasn’t the grueling

dance routines or the complicated songs. It wasn’t the long hours. It wasn’t even Ursula’s increasingly

rude, possessive, and aggressive behavior toward me. All that was manageable. It was Ariel.

Or rather, the lack of Ariel. I avoided her. She avoided me. Sometimes we exchanged long, tense,

silent looks across the room. It was torturous.

I thought that my feelings for her would dull and fade if I didn’t speak to or interact with her, but

they didn’t. In fact, the opposite seemed to be true. If someone tells you not to think about elephants,

what do you immediately picture? Elephants. Instantly. It was like that with Ariel. I wasn’t supposed

to be wanting her. As a result, she soon became the only thing I wanted. I dreamed about her. I woke

up every morning wondering about her.

Was she dating someone? Was she thinking about me? What was going through her head when we

stared at each other?

I wanted to kill it, but my infatuation with her was only getting worse. Like a fever, it was heating

up and driving me to distraction.

My deal with Ursula was meant to protect Ariel, but it felt more and more like a prison for me. I

knew I wasn't in love with Ariel. We'd only just met. But I was interested in her and she was *so*

close. Except that she wasn't really. She might be physically near me, but she'd never been more out

of reach.

One evening I stayed late at the rehearsal space, working on lines by myself. I may not be a

perfectionist on the same level as my brother Holden—his need for control was nearly pathological

—but I hated to fall short at anything. That meant time got away from me sometimes. It's not like I

could run lines with Ursula, I could barely stomach being in the same room with her. When I finally

snapped out of my work, I found that hours had gone by. It was dark outside, and there wasn’t a soul

in sight.

I was heading out when I heard the rehearsal track playing in one of the dance studios. I followed

the sound out of curiosity. Ariel was rehearsing alone.

She moved like quicksilver, darting and moving across the floor with an effortless, easy grace.

She was facing the mirror at the front of the room and her face was serene and happy. She’d taken her

hair down and it streamed behind her like a pennant.

Ariel was so incredibly beautiful. So free. She reminded me of something otherworldly. A

magical creature, possessed of infinite poise, flexibility, energy, and grace. And she was obviously

lost in the moment. She was part of the music.

That is, until she caught sight of me watching her in the mirror.

The music went on, filling the room with sound, but Ariel froze in an instant. She stumbled to a

halt and her pale skin flushed pink. Her eyes locked onto mine in the reflection and grew huge and

round. We stared at one another for a long, silent moment.

“Hi,” I said eventually. It felt like an inadequate thing to say but continuing to stare awkwardly at

her couldn’t be better.

She blinked at me. “Hi.” Her voice was soft and hesitant. The way she was looking at me made

me think she wanted to talk to me, too.

“You’re here late,” I managed. I felt like I’d overstepped and intruded on her private moment. I

shouldn’t have come in here. But now that I was here, and we were alone, I wanted to talk to her.

Just… talk to her. I’d been so curious about her for so long.

She nibbled on her lower lip nervously. “So are you.”

Her eyes crawled up and down my body in a way that made me exposed and transparent. I

supposed I deserved it from the way I’d been ogling her.

“What were you doing?” I asked.

She cocked her head to the side. “Dancing. Practicing for tomorrow. What did it look like I was

doing? Underwater basket weaving?”

I smirked at her. She was quick and sarcastic. I happened to like quick, sarcastic women.

“It looked like dancing,” I admitted, smiling and feeling a bit foolish. Why’d she always have to

rob me of my ability to be charming? I was usually *so good* at it. “Do you stay late every day?” I

asked.

“No,” she said after a moment. She looked around herself in confusion. “What time is it?”

Good question. I checked my watch. “Eight.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “I must have lost track of time. Sometimes I get carried

away…” she trailed off, looking sheepish.

“I did the same thing,” I replied.

“I’m going to be late,” she said, rushing toward the door. She was either very late or in a big

hurry to be away from me.

“Sebastian’s?” I guessed. I’m sure working two jobs was exhausting. Ariel must have unlimited

energy.

She shrugged at me. “That’s where I work,” she said. “When I don’t work here, that is.” Her

voice was soft. “I really better go.”

“How are you liking the movie business?” I asked her. “Are you enjoying it?”

Ariel paused and stared. “It’s not like I expected.” She smirked. “So far it’s been a lot more like

dance class.”

“It’ll get more interesting soon,” I promised her. “Once my brother Holden gets here and starts

ordering us all around.”

“Are his orders more interesting than Mia’s orders?” Ariel asked.

“*They’re different*.”

“Oh?” she cocked an eyebrow at me. “Do tell.”

“I mean, sure,” I explained. “They’re different. Both my brother and Mia are bossy, impetuous,

and exacting. They both love having their way. They both love having everyone else dance to their

little tune. In Mia’s case, she loves it literally. But Holden is… taller. He can’t dance worth a damn.

He also usually has a camera with him. And lights. And an attitude.”

“You really know how to talk him up. Your brother sounds *delightful*.” She rolled her big, blue

eyes.

I grinned at her. “Well, he’s alright, but he’s not as great as me, that’s for sure.”

“I’m sure he isn’t,” she said softly, although I’d only been joking. Still, it lifted my spirits to think

that she still liked me, at least a little bit. “I really can’t wait.” Her smile was genuine but not lasting.

“About the other night--” I ventured, but she cut me off with a shake of her head.

She frowned. “It’s fine,” she said. “We don’t need to rehash it.”

“I was just going to say that I’m sorry.”

Ariel’s lips parted in surprise. “Don’t worry about it.” Her expression had shifted and she now

looked worried. “Just forget about it. Look, I need to go. I really am late.”

I wanted to go on talking to her, but I knew better. I also wanted to tell her that I was still

frustrated that I hadn’t kissed her. But I wasn’t supposed to be in here talking to her. I was meant to be

pretending to be in love with Ursula. I made a deal to protect Ariel, and in order to do that, I was

going to have to avoid her.

I nodded, not sure what to say. “Have a nice evening,” I blurted. I knew I wouldn’t. I’d spend the

rest of it thinking about her, that was for sure.

“See you around,” Ariel replied, grabbing her bag and rushing past me. She looked back over her

shoulder at me like she was relieved that I wasn’t pushing the topic. I couldn’t do anything but let her

go.

19

ARIEL

THE PICTURE of Derek and me almost kissing didn’t end up on the internet. I looked on Meg Butler’s

blog for the next few days, and all the other nasty gossip sites, too. I was waiting for the photo to drop

and something to happen, but it never did. Whatever Derek gave Meg must have been enough. I guess

I should've felt better. But I didn't. If anything, I felt worse because I was lonely.

Over the next week and a half, work became a stalemate of repressed feelings and longing looks

on my part. Derek barely looked at me at all, and I tried not to read into it. But at least the grueling

workload kept me partially distracted. After a few days of being the world's most obedient chorus

girl, I clawed my way back to group one. During the evenings I recorded Ursula's vocals in a studio

or worked at Sebastian's. I kept my head down, but I kept my chin up. And I avoided the hell out of

Derek when I saw him around.

The situation was made more complicated by the fact that I now had to dance to my own voice

singing duets with Derek while Ursula lip synced her way through the parts. It was my voice that

sounded so good with his. Mine. But I couldn't tell anyone. Meanwhile, everybody fawned all over

Ursula about her incredible singing voice and how talented she was. She soaked it all up like sponge.

Even Derek seemed impressed, and I think that's what grated on me most of all.

And for all my careful efforts to avoid feelings for Derek, they kept growing. Every time I saw

him, my heart panged. My breathing sped up. My knees felt weak. The man was my kryptonite and no

matter how much I told myself that I wasn't falling for him, the truth was that I'd fallen for him a long

time before I ever met him. I'd fallen in love with him sometime around sophomore year of high

school and it had only ever gotten worse. Working near, but not next to him was a special kind of

torture.

And it wasn't the only type of torture I was subject to, either. As I'd been avoiding any social

interaction at rehearsals, Ursula had been busy making friends with a few select members of the

chorus and making sure those favorites of hers got special treatment. Ursula had a few numbers with

the full chorus, so she was rehearsing with us more and more, and the choreographer listened to her

feedback. It was getting harder and harder for me to keep my position in group one with her constant

meddling.

And the girls had been getting nastier. I'd been learning that the best way to be professional was

to replace 'fuck you' with 'okay great.' I was getting pretty good at it, but it was hell on my patience.

“Where should we go tonight?” Jess asked Ursula one afternoon. Ursula was holding court with

her group of special favorites as usual. I was obviously not one of her favorites, but I did happen to

be in close proximity at the moment. I tried to remain out of earshot as much as I could—my strategy

was to make Ursula forget I existed for a while—but I couldn’t avoid overhearing them this time.

“Are we still on for drinks?”

“Oh, I’m going to have to take a raincheck. I’ve got a hot date with Derek tonight,” Ursula said,

looking over at me to make sure I heard it. “We’re going to a costume party. He’s going to be Batman

to my Catwoman. I’ve got my leather body suit all ready and laid out in my trailer.”

I swallowed hard. I shouldn’t have been surprised or hurt, after all, I’d been the one to insist that

Derek and I be ‘just friends,’ but it still felt crappy. I bet Ursula looked damn good in a Catwoman

costume. She had a much sexier body than me, rounded and womanly where I was delicate and

girlish. I could easily pass for a sixteen or seventeen-year-old with no makeup and the right clothes. I

got carded constantly when I tried to buy alcohol. Ursula had the body of Jessica Rabbit.

“Oh, how exciting,” Jess swooned. “You two are such a beautiful couple.”

“He’s so dreamy,” Flo added. They were such a bunch of sycophants. “It’s so sweet the way you

two are in love for real. How are things going?”

“Amazing,” Ursula replied. Then her voice dropped to a near-whisper. “He stayed over last

night.”

My body reacted all on its own. Without any conscious thought, I abruptly got up and starting

walking, deciding the bathroom was the best destination when I realized I had none. I was going to

puke if I had to listen to any more of this. Just as the door swung closed, and I was able to take a

clean breath, it opened again. It was Flo.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “You look a little pale.”

“Yeah. Fine.” I prayed she’d go away.

I really wasn’t in the mood to be taunted by Flo, who at this point I just considered an extension of

Ursula. Ursula had completely won. She was dating Derek. I saw the stupid pictures on the internet.

Ursula and Derek were out there every night, hanging all over each other. He looked happy enough

about it.

I’d been right to be wary of him. He was, after all, known for his committed bachelor lifestyle.

The idea that it could be me of all people that could tempt him into something resembling a

relationship was laughable.

“You danced really well today,” Flo said, primping in the mirror. She wasn’t using the bathroom,

which made me think she was just in here to talk to me. “I was impressed. It’s no wonder you got that

solo.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, shocked I managed to get anything with Ursula undermining me. “You too.”

“It’s too bad you’re going through the men on set so quickly,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m

sure you feel terrible about that now.”

“What?”

“Your dates,” she clarified. “I heard you’ve been making the rounds. Apparently, you even tried to

seduce Derek Prince.”

“I didn’t try to seduce anyone. Where did you hear that?”

She raised an eyebrow. “That’s not what *he’s telling people*.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Oh,” she said, condescendingly. “Didn’t you know? According to Ursula, Derek told everyone

that you came on to him and he turned you down. So instead, you’ve turned your attention to every

other man on set. You're quite the topic of conversation. I heard some people talking about you at

lunch."

I froze. Was that true? Was everybody gossiping about me? Or was she trying to bait me? I never

knew where I stood with Flo, Jess, or Ursula.

Derek had been avoiding me lately, but I'd been avoiding him back.

"Well, then Ursula is a liar," I said. "Because I haven't slept with anyone working on this movie

and I'm not going to."

"Hmm," she replied. "Well I'm sorry to hear people are gossiping about you behind your back.

That's never fun."

"No, it really isn't," I grated out. "I sure hope you don't spread the rumors you hear about me,

Flo."

"I would never."

I hated it when people lied to my face.

"Okay great. Thanks."

She smirked. "Don't mention it. This business is so dependent on word of mouth," Flo continued.

I was absolutely sure that Ursula had put her up to this. "It would be horrible if you got a reputation

for being a slut."

"I'm not a slut." I ground my teeth. I wanted, in that moment, to hit Flo. I'd never hit anyone in my

life. But all of a sudden, I wanted to.

She giggled. "Oh, I know that, silly," she told me, playing it off. "But a reputation is a reputation,

even if it's not true."

If she was building up to something, she needed to spit it out. "What are you getting at, Flo? I

didn't sleep with anybody! I definitely didn't attempt to seduce Derek."

"Oh nothing. Just thinking aloud. You know, it might be a good idea for you to just drop out of the

production. Don't you think?"

I blinked. "What? Why?"

"Well, it's probably making Ursula uncomfortable to see you, don't you think? It might be better

for your career if she didn't feel that way about you. Even if it's not true. She's very influential."

Ugh. Ursula should really come do her own dirty work.

"It shouldn't bother her at all. I never touched her boyfriend."

Ursula wanted rid of me. Either that or Flo wanted my solo. Actually, the more I thought about the

situation, it was probably both.

Ursula had already won, but apparently that wasn't good enough. She wanted me to run away with

my tail between my legs, too? Haha. No way. This production was my ticket to a Screen Actor's

Guild membership. I needed that for auditions and any chance at a future in the industry. I was not

going to run away from my opportunities just because Ursula didn't like me. Or because I couldn't

have Derek. Even if it broke my heart and killed me, I was doing this.

"I'm not quitting," I told Flo. "You can tell Ursula that if you want to."

Flo shrugged. "Again, I was just thinking."

"Okay great." *Fuck you*. "I've gotta' go."

I stormed out of the bathroom, unwilling to engage on this topic any further with Flo. I was

steaming mad. Part of me wanted to reach out to Derek and yell at him, but I just didn't have the heart.

I told the choreographer I was feeling sick and she took one look at how pale I was and sent me home.

20

DEREK

"YEAH, that one. Right in front. Doing the solo. Her."

"Really?"

"That's what they say. Easy as pie. Practically a nymphomaniac."

I was passing by the soundstage where the chorus girls were about to film one of their first scenes

when I overheard a grip and a gaffer talking about the girls. I looked over, wondering who they were

talking about. It was Ariel. She was just finishing up a solo wearing her new, sequined costume. She

looked fantastic. They hadn't noticed me, so I continued to listen, pretending to be distracted by my

phone, but feeling my mood tanking by the second.

The last few weeks of rehearsals had bled into a confusing, long blur. I had to see Ariel every

day, but I couldn't touch her, talk to her, or even acknowledge her without risking Ursula making good

on her threat. It was killing me slowly.

"Maybe I can get her number then," the grip said, squinting. "If that's the village bicycle, then I

certainly wouldn't mind a ride. I bet she can do the splits. Do you think she can do the splits?"

"I'm sure she can do the splits," the gaffer said. "She can probably do the whole Kamasutra

without breathing hard. Look at her legs."

"I'm looking. I'm definitely looking."

The gaffer laughed. "Word is she'll sleep with anything that moves, so you might even have a

chance."

“Who’d you hear this from?” the grip asked.

“One of the other chorus girls that are always hanging around with Ursula Jones,” the gaffer

replied. “According to her, this girl has such low standards she might even sleep with you.”

“Gee thanks.” He looked torn between hope and offense.

“Hey, I am trying to help you here. But you should definitely use a rubber if the rumors are true.

Especially if she’s a sure thing. You don’t need to pick up any infections.”

He rolled his eyes. “Again. Thanks.”

I frowned. It didn’t take a genius to put the pieces together on this rumor. Ursula had struck again.

Holden, ever the perfectionist, was unsatisfied with something about the set, so the gaffer and the

grip had to quit talking after that and the chorus girls were allowed to take a break. Ariel was

approached by the grip and shook her head aggressively at whatever he said to her. He shuffled off

dejectedly and she looked extremely frustrated and stomped off, flushing.

This was getting out of hand.

I might be fulfilling my end of the bargain by staying away from Ariel, but it seemed like Ursula

was still hellbent on running Ariel off too. I could only guess that these rumors were her idea.

Meanwhile, I’d been attending event after boring event with Ursula on my arm. It was getting very

old. The press, particularly Meg Butler, might be getting a good show, but it was at the expense of my

happiness. And clearly Ursula was still tormenting Ariel on top of it. When Ariel went into an empty

rehearsal room, I followed her.

“I told you,” she said, turning around angrily. “*I don’t want—*” she paused when she saw it was

me and not the grip. “Oh. It’s you.”

I raised my hands up peacefully like I had when she’d screamed at me in her car that first day we

met. “I just want to talk to you.”

“I really think you’ve done enough,” she said. “Don’t you?”

“I heard the rumors,” I said carefully.

Ariel made a noise that sounded like it shouldn’t come from a human throat. It was an angry,

frustrated noise. Her hands were balled up into fists at her side.

“Did you start them?” she asked, looking frustrated. “I heard you started them.”

“I didn’t start them. Come on, why would I do that?”

She sniffled and then straightened. “I have no idea. These last two weeks have been horrible.

Everybody’s talking about me, and as far as I can tell, nobody has anything nice to say.”

“I do.”

As frustrated as she was, I felt better being with her. Just being alone with her felt soothing to me,

like a balm on a sunburn. I hadn’t realized just how much I missed her. Even though we’d both been

on set for eight to ten hours a day, we hadn’t said a word to each other in almost two whole weeks.

There were things I wanted to tell her. I might have promised Ursula that I would pretend that Ariel

was invisible, but she wasn’t, she wasn’t invisible at all. She was all I could see.

At the moment, however, Ariel looked like she wished I’d disappear. She laughed bitterly when

she was done making her little angry noises. “Everybody’s heard the rumors and think they know all

about me.” Ariel looked like she was on the verge of tears. “I’ve had to turn down half the men on the

set who think I’m the world’s easiest conquest.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say. It sounded inadequate even in my own ears.

Ariel sort of melted in on herself. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at me. “I don’t

know what to do. I don’t know who to trust. Somebody told me you started the rumors, but I think

Ursula put her up to it. I think she started them. I think she wants me to just give up and quit." She

laughed bitterly. "I can't believe how insane this all is."

"Me either." I shook my head, wondering how we got so far down this insane path. All I wanted

to do was kiss Ariel. It was what I'd wanted to do since I first saw her. And it felt like the entire

world was preventing me.

"I better get back," Ariel said, turning and trying to brush past me.

I probably should have at least tried to fight what I was feeling, but I didn't. I grabbed her hand,

spun her around, and looked into her eyes.

"I'm going to kiss you now unless you tell me not to." Her lips parted in surprise. But she didn't

say anything, perhaps too surprised to reply. "Last chance." She just continued to stare.

I couldn't help myself.

She was frozen in my arms at first. Her eyes were wide open, and her lips pressed against mine

for a chaste, shocked heartbeat. Then the passion I'd been feeling for her mixed with whatever she

must have been feeling for me and the dam broke.

Her mouth tasted like bubblegum, and I tightened my grip on her waist, exploring her. She buried

her fingers in my hair, gasping into our kiss and letting me steal her breath. She was stealing my

rationality. It only seemed fair.

Rationally, I shouldn’t care about her. I barely knew her. I shouldn’t care about ruining her career,

or her life, or even her afternoon. But watching her grow more and more unhappy over the last week

while I put on the world’s stupidest dog and pony show for Ursula and the paparazzi was killing me.

Now, finally, I felt alive again.

Her soft lips, eager tongue, and sweet breath revived me. This was what I needed. What I’d been

missing my whole life. I kissed her and the world realigned around me, making my heart pound and

my thoughts race away. I wanted them to go. I just wanted Ariel.

I couldn’t think of anything else but the feel of her in my arms and the need to be closer. There

was a wall here somewhere in this room and I managed to put her back against it, pinning her there so

I could really take my time with her. Her neck tasted as good as her mouth did, and I loved the ways

she whimpered when I gently grazed it with my teeth. Her grip on my hair tightened and her breath

hitched.

When we finally pulled apart, panting, I could see my own need reflected in her blue eyes. I

needed more of this. A lot more. But this was probably the worst possible place to get it.

“Derek, we shouldn’t do this,” she breathed, suddenly looking nervous. “Ursula—”

“I don’t want her. I was never seeing her. Not for real. The pictures are just for the press.”

Relief colored her features. “I thought—”

“I know,” I said, brushing her cheek. Her skin was so soft, warm, and smooth. “I let you think that.

I did it because Ursula threatened to get you fired from the production. But she’s gone too far with

these rumors about you. She’s not keeping up her side of the bargain. That means I don’t have to

either.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means that I’m done pretending that I’m not crazy about you.”

She shook her head. “She’ll have me fired. You have to keep pretending with her. Otherwise I’ll

be the one who suffers.”

I frowned. “This is dumb—”

She kissed me and her gaze turned mischievous. “It is dumb. But just because you have to pretend

in public doesn’t mean we have to pretend in private, does it?”

I blinked at her. “I thought you didn’t want to do that.”

She laughed. “I don’t,” she said, gripping my upper arms with her little hands and looking at me

possessively. “I actually hate the idea. But I hate the idea of living in purgatory more, don’t you?”

I swallowed. “I can’t ask you to do this, Ariel.” It wasn’t fair to her. I didn’t like the idea of

keeping her a secret.

Her expression was understanding. “You aren’t asking. I’m offering. I guess you can turn me down

if you want to.” The feeling of her little fingers on the nape of my neck said otherwise.

I shook my head back and forth. “I don’t think so.”

Ariel deserved better than me. I knew that. But I couldn’t resist her, either. I’d just have to try and

be good enough.

She smirked at me. “Then we do this in secret. Maybe it’ll be fun? Either way, it’s temporary,

right? Only until the movie comes out. Then we can be totally honest about everything.”

I nodded. “You’re right. It would only be for a few more weeks.” I kissed her again, feeling like

I’d just found a part of myself that had been missing for a long, long time. “I still don’t like the idea of

keeping things a secret, but...”

She reached out and put a finger to my lips. “It’ll be okay,” she promised. “Besides, just think

how furious Ursula will be when she realizes that we’ve been together, right under her nose, this

entire time. The look on her face will be priceless.” She paused. “But she can’t find out. Promise me

she won’t.”

I took her hand and looked down at it, tiny and a delicate, in my own palm. I wouldn’t do anything

to hurt her. Even if it meant keeping a secret that I knew could compromise us both. It was the lesser

of two evils. “I promise.”

21

DEREK

“SO, be honest, what do you think?” I asked Ariel, showing off my Batman costume that evening. “Do

I look like the caped crusader?” I did a few of my best Batman poses for her.

Ariel giggled at me, peeling off my mask and looking so good in her yoga pants and little tank top

that I could barely contain myself. “It’s great. Very fancy. I love the tights.” She winked.

“These are crime-fighting tactical leggings,” I said seriously.

“They’re tights.”

I laughed. “Yeah. They’re basically tights.”

“Well, I appreciate the commitment to the character.” Ariel was all smiles and giggles tonight, and

it made my heart lift. She’d been so down lately. We both had.

“I try,” I said modestly. A lot of actors get bored of costumes and end up hating Halloween. Not

me. I’d always had a natural flair for the dramatic, I guess. I couldn’t get enough. Halloween was my

absolute favorite holiday and always had been. Candy and costumes? Yes, please.

“How was the party?” she asked, taking a sip of the glass of wine I’d poured her when she

arrived. “Did you have fun?”

I shook my head, thinking Ursula might be the one to finally make me hate Halloween. “No. It was

a disaster. It was one of those horrible Instagrammer parties where everyone is just endlessly taking

pictures. Nobody was even talking. It was completely bizarre. Just a whole lot of people taking

pictures and fiddling with their phones, and barely even acknowledging the other humans right next to

them.”

“Sounds like my high school,” she remarked.

I laughed. “Back in my day, high school kids didn’t have smart phones.”

Smart phones appeared when I was in my late teens, and even then, most kids hadn’t had them. I

couldn’t imagine what high school would have been like with the internet literally in your pocket. It

was a miracle anyone learned at all anymore.

Ariel smirked at me. “Okay, old man,” she said. “Do you want to tell me how you walked three

miles uphill both ways through the snow and worked in the factories until your eyesight went because

you only had candlelight from candles you had to make yourself on the old homestead?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not that old. Jeez. Besides, I never walked to school in my life. I definitely

never lived on the old homestead. I grew up in a castle. I was a stereotypical rich kid, remember?”

Ariel laughed. “Oh yeah, how can I forget about that. You probably had a driver, didn’t you?”

“I sure did.” I didn’t even share the fact that my driver was actually a helicopter pilot. It was

pointless to pretend I was ever normal. I’d never been even close to normal. I probably never would

be and that was fine with me. Being normal seemed decidedly shitty, anyway.

“So, you basically were a little Bruce Wayne then,” Ariel said, looking at me with a little smile

on her face. “Pre parent-murder, obviously.”

“I always wanted to be Batman when I was a kid,” I agreed. “I saw that as a viable career path

for a while, since I did seem to have the rest of the package. Except for the whole orphan thing,

obviously. That sounded pretty lousy.”

“Why Batman? Why not Superman?” Ariel asked. “Superman is a lot stronger. And his backstory

is a lot less tragic.”

What an excellent question. And I had an excellent answer for it. “Because Superman is dumb,” I

told her.

She shook her head at me. “He can fly!”

This was a very longstanding question between me and my brother Thomas. He always picked

Superman. He was always wrong.

“No, I mean, Superman is literally, actually stupid. He’s an idiot. The man is strong and virtuous

and whatever, but he constantly gets outwitted by people he should be able to not only defeat but

defeat easily. Batman has no powers, but he’s smart. When Superman and Batman go head to head,

who wins? Batman wins.”

“Plus, he’s very handsome,” Ariel added. “And super rich.”

“Exactly. Batman’s the best. Batman is where it’s at. Anyone who tells you different is totally

wrong.”

We were at my house. It was late, a little after ten p.m., but it had been the soonest I could get out

of the party with Ursula. “I wanted to go with the Tim Burton Batman from the nineties,” I explained

to Ariel. “You know the one with the weird Bat-nipples on the suit? But I couldn’t find one on short

notice. So, I was stuck with the more modern Batman. It’s fine. It’s just not the same, you know?”

“Bat-nipples?” Ariel asked, staring at my smooth, bat-nipple-less chest. “Do you mean…” she

trailed off.

“Haven’t you seen Batman Forever or Batman and Robin?” I gasped, horrified.

Ariel shook her head and then looked at me sideways when I continued to gape at her. “No. Is it

good?”

My mouth was still hanging open. Good?! No. *They were not good*. They were so bad they were

good, though. I considered the Tim Burton Batman movies to be an absolutely essential part of

nineties cinema. Although, on further thought…

“How old were you in 1992?” I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer. I mean, I’d been tiny, but

I’d been *alive*.

She blinked. “I wasn’t born until 1999. So, um, negative seven?”

I’d realized she was younger than me. I mean, that was obvious. But she was younger than the Bat-

nipples. That was *young*. I rubbed my temples. She was eleven years younger than me. The overall

number didn’t matter to me. It was the cultural references. So many. There would be so many she

wouldn’t know! I had to start immediately if I wanted to rectify this situation.

“Come on,” I told her, not even bothering to change out of all the spandex, “we have to watch

Batman Forever right now.” I grabbed her hand and led her up the stairs. “This is an emergency.”

She giggled as we climbed up to the media room. “I didn’t realize you were such a big nerd.”

I grinned back at her. “Is that going to be an issue?”

She shook her head. “No. I think it’s cute.”

Cute. Not dashingly handsome. Not charmingly urbane. Not irresistibly suave. Cute.

“I guess I can deal with being cute,” I grumbled, planting her on the couch and then digging out the

Blu-Ray from my collection. “But what I cannot deal with, not even for another moment, is you, Ariel

Cross, not knowing about the bat-nipples. This gets fixed right now.”

Ariel crossed her legs and stared at me as I fiddled with the equipment. “You know,” she said,

giggling at me between words, “when most men grab your hand and pull you up the stairs at ten at

night, it’s not just to show you their, um, bat-nipples.”

I paused. She had a point. Then again, bat-nipples were important. We could have sex afterward. I

put the Blu-Ray in the player.

“I’m not most men.”

She smirked at me and looked me up and down, Batman costume and all. “That’s definitely true.”

22

DEREK

ARIEL FELL asleep on the couch halfway through the movie, curled up against my side with her face

against my shoulder. She’d been laughing and discussing the movie with me until about the midway

point. Then her energy gave out and she fell silent. Now, she was totally asleep. She sighed and

snuggled closer as she slept, cuddling in and filling something in my heart that I hadn’t really realized

I wanted. I'd forgotten how wonderful and comforting simple physical affection could be.

But when the movie was over and Seal's 'Kiss From A Rose' played over the credits, I didn't

quite know what to do. I was still wide awake. Insomnia was kind of my thing in general. I could

easily survive off four or five hours of sleep a night. I'd had it checked out and the doctors said I was

perfectly healthy, just unusual. But Ariel… she was out like a light. She clearly needed a more normal

amount of sleep. To be fair, it was almost three a.m.

"Ariel," I whispered, pushing her hair back from her forehead. "The movie's over."

She mumbled something but her eyelids didn't even flutter against her cheek. She was really

asleep. I didn't want to wake her. But I also needed to not be wearing a Batman costume at some

point in the evening. A man should only be expected to wear tactical leggings for so long. I carefully

slipped out from under her and changed clothes, coming back to find her still snoozing on the couch.

In hindsight, it made perfect sense that she was exhausted. She'd been in dance rehearsals all

week long, plus working a second job at Sebastian's some nights. This was the first break she'd had

in a while, and her energy reserves were probably depleted.

“Ariel,” I told her, lifting her chin up. “I’m going to carry you to the bedroom. Okay?”

She didn’t so much as react. Gingerly, so as not to disturb her too much, I scooped her up and

carried her down the hallway to a guest bedroom, taking off her shoes and tucking her in. I got up to

leave and found my hand held in both of hers.

“Don’t go,” she said sleepily. Her voice was inviting. “Stay with me? Sleep with me?”

“Are you sure?”

“Mhmm,” she mumbled, holding on to my hand. She was only half awake, but I believed she knew

what she was saying and where she was.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I knew she was too tired to make love, so even though my body had

other ideas, I firmly reminded myself that this was going to be a sleeping situation only. I slipped

under the covers with her and she snuggled back up to me right away, draping one of her legs over

mine and putting her head back on my chest. I may have spent the whole evening with Ursula

possessively clawing at my arm, but here, in the dark, I felt a different, much more welcome type of

possession. I wrapped my arms around Ariel in return, kissing her forehead and willing myself calm.

It wasn’t easy. My body was on high alert. There was a scantily clad, beautiful, warm, soft body

pressed up against me. My cock was pretty sure that meant one thing only, and it definitely wasn’t

sleep. I took slow deep breaths and let the arousal go, knowing that we’d have another chance

tomorrow. It took a very long time, but I eventually drifted off to sleep.

WHEN I AWOKE in the very early morning, Ariel wasn’t there. I opened my eyes in the darkness,

disoriented that I wasn’t in my own bed and touching the warm spot in the bed that still felt empty

without her. My hand reached and reached until it hit the end of the bed. She was gone.

“Ariel?” I asked, looking around in confusion. I was instantly wide awake. I sat up straight,

feeling disoriented and lost.

Had she left? Run away? Had she changed her mind? What had I done wrong?

“I’m right here,” she said, coming back from the other room with a glass of water. She sounded

surprised. “I just got thirsty.”

There wasn’t much light in the room, but there was enough for me to see the outline of her figure

and the shape of her smile. She lay down next to me and offered me a sip of her water. I accepted it,

feeling my adrenaline reaction fading now that she was back next to me.

“I missed you,” I told her, pulling her back into my arms. “I thought you’d left.”

She shook her head, leaning it in against me and nuzzling my neck. “Nope.”

I kissed her, pulling her closer and squeezing her soft curves against my body. “Good.”

She kissed me back, waking up my libido in a hurry. “It is good, isn’t it?”

I nodded, feeling my hands go wandering down the length of her body and praying this was going

where I thought it was.

Ariel teased me with her tongue, stealing my breath when I wanted to be stealing hers. How had

she wrapped me around her little finger so quickly and effectively? It must have been her smooth, soft

skin. Or her wonderful smell. Or the way she held onto my shoulders as I pulled the straps of her top

off of hers.

I got on top and straddled her. It was approximately five a.m. High time to finally make love to

Ariel.

Her smooth, soft, round tits filled my palms when I cupped her, and she arched her back into my

touch. She fit so perfectly in my hands, like she’d been made just for me. In the low light of the

coming dawn from the window, her pale skin almost glowed. My eyes drank her in. She was radiant.

I rolled her pink, hardened nipples between my thumbs and forefingers, then tasted one nipple and

then the other. She sighed and whimpered at my attention, staring up at the ceiling wide-eyed and

open-mouthed. I loved seeing her this way.

And I loved the sweet, soft wetness I found between her thighs when I rolled her yoga pants down

her hips even more. She was very ready for me. And I was more than ready for her.

But that definitely didn't mean I was in any rush. I ran my fingers over every inch of her skin,

wanting to memorize everything. I'd spent weeks watching her dance and feeling like she was just out

of my reach. Now that she was under my fingertips, it felt essential that I take my time.

I teased her with my fingers underneath her damp panties, pressing one digit inside of her to the

first knuckle and watching her expression shift as I gave her slow, shallow thrusts. She put her hand

over mine, pressing my fingers more deeply and tipping her head back as she took what she wanted

from my hand.

"Like that, do you?" I asked her, smirking.

She whimpered. She was already on the verge of climaxing.

“You’re not coming like this,” I told her, adding a second finger along with the first and then

removing them, “you’re going to have to wait.”

“Why?” Her voice was breathy.

“Because I’ve been watching you dance now for two weeks in rehearsals,” I told her, kissing her

neck and whispering in her ear. “Shaking your round, sequined little ass in front of me. Teasing me.”

“I haven’t been teasing you,” she breathed. “That’s not—”

I pressed the head of my cock against her panties-clad pussy and she went silent. My body

disagreed. The sun was coming, but Ariel wouldn’t be. Not yet. “So, now I’m going to tease you.”

23

ARIEL

DEREK TURNED me around so that my back was against his firmly muscled chest. He then lifted my

free leg and set it up behind his knee. I was spread wide open, facing away from him. His cock was

still behind the fabric of his boxers but now pressed firmly against the cleft of my ass, tempting me.

The sun was coming up, and it filled the room with a low, orangey glow. It was only when I was

turned that I could see a full-length mirror on my side of the room gave us a full view of both of us in

the dim, predawn light. Derek’s eyes locked with mine in the reflection. He’d planned this and was

clearly enjoying the view.

He pulled my panties aside, baring me to the cool air of the bedroom and the reflection in the

mirror. My pussy was dripping wet for him. I was panting and sweating in the reflection.

“Look how pretty you are,” he whispered, stroking down the length of my naked body and cupping

my tits with one hand, while the other spread my inner lips and dipped inside me again. “You’re so

ready.”

I’d never felt very womanly. I felt like my body was too athletic and too boyish. I didn’t look like

the girls you saw on Instagram with the thirty-eight-inch busts and twenty-five-inch waists. Although I

had curves, I wasn’t just straight up and down, they weren’t as lush or full as I wanted them to be. But

staring at myself in the mirror, I felt beautiful.

My naked tits were heaving with each ragged breath I drew. I’d never seen myself look like this—

spread open, wild, desperate for a man to fuck me. The sight of his middle finger inside of me made

me feel out of my body. Staring into my own eager face and seeing Derek's satisfied, cool smile

pushed me higher.

"Please," I whimpered. I didn't even know exactly what I was asking for. But I was begging for

more already.

"Lift your arms up around my neck," he said, whispering in my ear in a way that made me shiver

against him. "And keep them there."

After a confused second, I complied, arching my back and feeling both vulnerable and pampered

as he resumed his careful, rhythmic exploration between my legs, still over my panties. My clit ached

to be touched, but he touched everywhere but where I needed it most. I shifted my hips back and forth,

trying to find the friction I needed from the pull of the fabric and the gentle pressure of his fingers. It

wasn't enough.

"Derek…" the voice coming from my body didn't sound like me.

"Shhh," he said, nipping the back of my neck. "Quiet."

I tried. I really did. I tried to be quiet but little plaintive noises continued as he rubbed between

my legs.

“So noisy,” he said against my ear. “Are you always so noisy during sex?” I made an

unintelligible noise. “It’s cute,” he declared, flicking my clit with his thumb. “But I might need to

teach you to be quiet, huh?”

I shook my head. I had a feeling that sort of lesson would require more teasing. And I wasn’t sure

I’d survive it at the moment.

“How much do you care about these panties?” he finally asked, plucking the G-string string on my

hip.

I made another meaningless noise and shook my head. I just wanted him to fuck me. Panties? What

panties?

“Good,” he said, twisting and snapping one side and then the other. I jumped excitedly and he

laughed. “I’ll buy you another pair if you want.”

I was now fully naked, and staring at myself as Derek continued to slowly, slowly pet between my

legs. The sight of his big, strong hand between my soft thighs was hypnotic.

“You’re a dancer,” he reminded me as I continued to work my hips back against him to urge him

on. “You’re supposed to have control over your body, aren’t you? Where’s that control now? Can’t

you stay still?” His tone was teasing.

I whimpered a negative and he chuckled. I felt it through my back as a low rumble. I’d never had a

sexual encounter like this before. The boys I’d been with in college were slobbering, fumbling idiots

by comparison. I’d been forced to do basically all the work, and even then, barely got off. This was

so different from those experiences it wasn’t even funny. My pleasure was entirely up to him. Derek

knew exactly how to touch me. And he was completely in control. I was just along for the ride.

“Try to be still,” he told me. He pulled his own pants down and finally pressed against me again.

“If you move, I’ll stop. If you make noise, I’ll stop.”

I froze and shut up. It took all of my brain cells to override the aching pressure between my legs

that said to move, but I stayed still as Derek rubbed the head of his cock against my opening.

“You feel so tight,” he whispered, and his ragged breathing made me clench inside. “Like you

were made for me.”

I panted and stayed as still and quiet as I could, but it was starting to be impossible. As he rocked

his hips against me, I floated, breathless. With my arms wrapped around his neck from behind and my

body reflected in the mirror as he moved against me, his body was doing things to me I hadn't

realized were possible. Even with no direct pressure against my clit, I was close to climaxing. Could

my body do that? I was about to find out.

If I moved or made noise, I knew he'd stop. I bit my lip, feeling the pressure building. It was right

there. Just out of reach.

"You like that, don't you?" Derek whispered, slowing down as if he could somehow read my

damn brain. I guess my body was giving him all the clues he needed. He kissed my neck lazily. "I

think it's time to finally give you what you want, but not before I get what I want," he said, pulling out

of me right as I was almost there. He gently disengaged my arms from behind him and pulled my leg

down. "Come get on top of me, I want to see you move now."

I didn't need to be told twice. Finally freed to move, I crawled on top of him, noting his pleased

smile with a little shake of my head.

"I'm pretty sure you're the one who's a tease," I told him, taking him in hand and joining our

bodies with a sigh of sweet, sweet relief.

He bucked his hips from beneath, grabbing my hips and bouncing me up and down. Even when I

was on top, he was still in charge. “Show me how much you need to come,” he told me, looking up at

me and filling me completely. “Take what you need.”

I rode him eagerly, finally getting what I needed on my clit now that my bodyweight was

providing the friction and we were face to face. I was no expert at sex, but the way Derek’s eyes

widened as he watched me bounce told me I was on the right track. The rush of pleasure grew and

grew, cresting into a wave when my climax hit me. I arched my back into it, whimpering out his name

and wondering how the hell I made it this long without coming. He finished a few strokes behind me,

gripping my waist and sighing deeply. We lay there until the sun came up, tangled in each other’s arms

and our own private thoughts.

24

ARIEL

“I REALLY WISH I didn’t have to do this today,” Derek said, futzing with his tie and looking annoyed

that he was wearing a suit so early in the morning. I thought he looked great in the grey pinstriped suit,

blue shirt, and matching tie, but of course he wasn’t dressed up for me.

“Where is she taking you this time?” I asked. I was already feeling jealous and he wasn’t even

gone yet. “Another party?”

He shook his head in annoyance. “Some kind of brunch?” Derek said. “I don’t know. I don’t even

ask questions anymore. I’m just following my publicist’s instructions. Dress up as Batman? Fine. Get

trotted out to a brunch. Whatever. It doesn’t matter where we’re going, I’ll be miserable no matter

what.”

Derek had another Saturday morning appearance with Ursula, but it wasn’t supposed to last all

day. He had to leave but promised he’d be home by lunch. I decided to hang around his house until he

returned, particularly when he offered me the swimming pool as a source of entertainment. It had been

ages since I’d gone for a swim. It might be October, but here in LA that was still summer. It was a

perfect temperature for a dip.

“You want to come swimming with me instead?” I offered. I was wearing a bathrobe meant for

Derek and it hung off me awkwardly. I flashed him. “I’m going to go skinny dipping.”

He looked seriously tempted and I shook my head. “I was only kidding,” I clarified. “Go be

Ursula’s arm candy for a few hours. I’ll still be here when you get back.”

He sighed. “Okay,” he said, looking like I was ordering him off to war. “But don’t put on clothes

until I get back.”

I laughed, shaking my head and kissing him goodbye. I was not committing to being nude for five

hours. “See you soon,” I told him, trying not to let my irritation at Ursula get the best of me. This was

what I had agreed to. Secrets were going to be a part of our world for a little while. I could deal with

that if it meant I got Derek in the end. Right? I told myself it was true.

In a few weeks, we could be totally honest. Derek could be honest about his relationship with

Ursula, and I could be honest with him about my voice. Once the production was over, I could tell

him, and it wouldn’t really matter. The world wouldn’t know, but at least we could be truthful.

In fact, I was wondering if I should tell him early. It would help explain why Ursula was so

hateful toward me. Plus, I just wanted him to know. But I’d made a promise to Ursula and it felt

dishonest to go back on it. I was an honest person. I kept my promises. Then again, she wasn’t exactly

honoring her side of the agreement. I was torn about it. Maybe by the time Derek got home, I’d have

come up with a plan.

The pool was in the back courtyard, surrounded by tall walls and palm trees. Perfectly private. I

slipped into the water, leaving my phone and the bathrobe next to the edge.

I'd always loved the water. Although dancing was always my extracurricular growing up, swim

team would have been my backup. I was a water baby. I was just about to dive under the water and

see if I could still do a flip when my phone rang. I paddled back over to the steps and answered.

"Ariel, what have you done?" my dad's voice asked incredulously through the phone. "What were

you thinking?"

I froze. How could he possibly know that I was sleeping with Derek? I looked around the high

walls, half expecting to see him on a cherry picker or something. Then I remembered that it was

impossible for him to know about that. He must be referring to something else I'd done that he

disapproved of.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said carefully. "But good morning to you too."

"Ariel, you should never have signed anything without sending it to me first," my dad said,

sounding irritated.

I took a deep breath. Crap. He knew about the contract I'd signed for 'She Done Him Wrong.'

"Sebastian told you?"

My dad made a harrumph noise. "No. He should have, but he didn't. It actually came up on a

conflict of interest disclosure form. Our firm handles all the contracts for the agent that represents

Ursula Jones. When you signed the contract, it appeared on my disclosures. You can imagine how

surprised I was to see your name pop up."

"Oh," I stuttered.

"Oh?" my dad replied sarcastically. "That's all you've got to say? Oh?"

I frowned. That was awfully unlucky. "Well, now you know, I guess."

"Why wouldn't you run this by me first?"

"Well, you couldn't review it, could you? It would have been a conflict of interest for you."

He laughed bitterly. "Do you think I would rather represent Ursula Jones' agent than my own

daughter?"

I bit my lip. "Yeah, I do. You've made no secret of the fact that you think I'm talentless."

There was a long pause on the other side of the line. "Ariel, I think you're very talented. I've

always thought that. Just because I don’t want you mixed up in Hollywood doesn’t mean I want to see

you get screwed over.”

“I’m not getting screwed over,” I told my dad. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Ariel, do you realize what you signed? You’re going to get no credit for your work.”

“I know that.”

“She’s going to claim your voice as her own!”

A little twinge in my heart reminded me that as much as my dad and I butted heads, he really did

care about me. He didn’t like the idea of anyone claiming my talent as their own, even though he

thought I should just give up. Even this small reminder that my dad cared about me was enough to

make me feel slightly teary.

“I know that too,” I told him. “Dad, I can read a contract. I may not have gone to law school, but I

know what I’m doing. This is my chance to break into Hollywood.”

“Do you really think that? Do you realize that you committed to *never* singing in a movie unless

credited to Ursula?”

I shook my head. “Only for this film.”

“Ariel, I’m a lawyer. Maybe listen to me on this? You signed a contract that’s perpetual. It applies

to any and all movies you ever appear in. You've signed your voice over to Ursula Jones

permanently. You can never get another film role that requires you to sing."

I swallowed hard. "No. That can't be right."

"I'm afraid it is," my dad replied. "Listen, Ariel, this is what I was trying to tell you. Hollywood

is cutthroat. It's a bad place for someone as trusting as you are. If you would just go to law school—"

"I'm not going to law school," I yelled. "I'll figure this out myself! Clearly you don't want to help

me, but I'm never going to be a lawyer and I don't need you pushing me anymore!"

I was losing my temper because I was scared that he was right. Had I just destroyed my career

before it ever started? My voice was my best asset. I could dance, sure, but not well enough to ever

turn that into a career in Hollywood. My big dream, starring in movie musicals and on Broadway,

required the use of my voice. I prayed I hadn't signed it away to Ursula.

"I'm going to take a look at your contract," my dad said, sounding so level-headed and reasonable

that I instantly regretted losing my cool. "I'll see if there are any loopholes and let you know."

I swallowed. "You don't have to do that."

"You're my daughter," he said. "I want to do it."

He hung up the phone then, leaving me feeling cold despite the warm water and sunlight. I got out

of the pool, wrapping the robe around myself again. I felt dirty.

Did I really sign my voice over to Ursula forever? I'd been so excited when I got the contract. It

was possible I didn't read it closely enough. I might have missed something. My dad was right, I

wasn't a lawyer. I'd thought I knew what I was doing, but the truth was that I just really, really wanted

to succeed. Now I might have made it so that my success was literally impossible because Ursula

now owned my voice.

I stumbled back inside Derek's posh LA mansion, crawling up the stairs and getting in the shower.

It would be hours until he got home. I washed, left him a note, and headed home. I needed to reread

my contract and think.

25

ARIEL

AT FIRST IT was fun to have a secret. Everybody on set was always going on about Derek and Ursula

and fawning over what a perfect couple they were. Their relationship practically had a fan club. Even

off the set, it seemed like all the gossip magazines were having a field day. If their names fit together

better, they'd probably have one of those terrible combination names. Like Bennifer. Or Brangelina.

But 'Dursula' sounded terrible and 'Ursulek' sounded worse, so thankfully they didn't even try.

But no matter what they were called, I knew the truth. Whenever she was hanging on him on set or

acting like they had some incredible date planned, I knew that it was really just blackmail and

pressure that kept him under her thumb.

Meanwhile, the movie was getting made around us. Derek and I made time for each other the best

we could. It wasn't exactly easy. I had a lot of songs I needed to record so that Ursula could lip-sync

them. We were usually only a few days ahead of shooting. And because Derek didn't know that I was

doing Ursula's voice work, I had to make up weird reasons why I couldn't always meet him.

I'm not sure why I was keeping her secret from him. I guess I was just too honest. It had always

been a bit of a fault of mine. But I just couldn't bring myself to tell him. Besides, a tiny corner of my

heart wasn't entirely convinced that this would be a lasting thing. As much as I cared about Derek, as

much as just being in his presence made my heart pound and my knees wobbly, I knew that he was a

movie star. Movie stars and mortals don’t mix. I worried that if I told him and Ursula found out, my

career would be over. I couldn’t rely on his protection, not really. It was better to protect myself.

Besides, I still had a mammoth problem. My contract. I’d read and reread it and yes, my dad was

right, I’d signed away my voice in perpetuity. Until I figured out a way to fix it, my dad had sworn me

to adhering to the rest of it. He told me in no uncertain terms that if I somehow found myself in breach

of contract with Ursula things would get even worse for me. So, until I managed to fix that problem, I

was stuck. Derek went on thinking that Ursula could sing, and I had to listen to him duetting with my

voice all day long. It was beyond frustrating.

Then there was the fact that he was always having to make press appearances that looked a whole

lot like dates with Ursula. That didn’t exactly feel great on my ego, either.

“Where are you going tomorrow?” I asked Derek one evening after we made love at his house. I’d

come in the back, as always, just to make sure that no one saw my car.

“Estrella again,” Derek said, looking disgusted. “I’m not sure why she’s so obsessed with that

place.”

“Estrella? I’ve never heard of it. Is it a restaurant?”

He nodded. “It’s pretty much the romantic destination right now. It’s where everybody wants to

have their hot dates.”

“Oh,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip. “That sounds nice.”

He frowned. “If I were going there with you, it might be.”

I smirked at him. “Maybe you can bring me home some cannoli.”

“Do you want me to?” he said. “I can. We could even have it delivered here some night, if you

want to try the other food.”

I shrugged. “Sure. I like cannoli.”

I was smiling and making light, but it did sting. The fact that we couldn’t go out in public or tell

anyone the truth was starting to feel terrible. What had been fun at first was now becoming a bit of a

nightmare.

“I’m sorry I can’t take you out for real,” Derek said, reading my mind despite my best efforts. “It’s

not going to last forever.”

I shook my head at him. “Don’t worry about it. Really. I knew what I was getting into.”

He didn’t look convinced. “I know. But I don’t think either one of us realized how hard it would

be to keep this secret. I want to take you out.”

I believed him. I was learning that Derek was like me, radically honest. He didn’t mince words

about his opinions or his beliefs. I liked that in a man.

It was obvious that all this secrecy was weighing on him, too. At least his texts to me during their

fake dates were funny. But they were becoming less funny as time went on. Everybody else in the

world thought that Ursula and Derek were the new golden couple of Hollywood. And everyone on set

thought I was a horrible slut.

Things had been getting genuinely uncomfortable. It was hard enough to make friends on a movie

set, but Ursula had been doing her very best to make everyone despise me.

The rumors about me being a slut had not gone away. Ursula’s plan to make the chorus girls turn

against me had ramped up significantly when I was awarded a solo that gave them an extra reason to

be jealous and catty. I tried my best to avoid listening to the little things that got back to me, but it did

hurt.

Turning down all the men on set had been a chore as well. Who’d have thought being a slut would

make me so popular. Only I wasn’t popular, exactly. I was infamous. And those men didn’t want to

date me. They just wanted to sleep with me.

But I’d never been popular in my life, so the fact that I wasn’t popular now wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that the other dancers were starting to undermine me in real ways. It was like high

school bullying all over again.

On Monday, somebody stole my lunch. On Tuesday, I found my tights had been ripped apart and

smeared with what looked like mascara. Wednesday, I got a short reprieve, but on Thursday I asked

Flo which room we were meeting in and she told me the wrong one. I ended up having to run across

the enormous studio in my sparkly little costume to get to the right place, and I was late again. If

Ursula’s goal was to make sure that I felt as uncomfortable and unwanted as possible, she’d

succeeded.

But at least I had Derek. As hard as it was to keep all these plates spinning, I knew that I had

someone that wanted to spend time with me. We were really starting to get to know one another now,

and it was incredible to me how normal he was. Despite his silver spoon upbringing, Derek was

decidedly down to earth.

“Don’t worry,” I told him, reaching out to straighten his tie so he’d look good in the pictures with

Ursula. “I know this is only temporary. This movie only films for three more weeks. Then, after the

release, you’ll be free.”

He nodded. “I know. But it feels like forever.” He shook his head. “It’s a terrible feeling to go out

and spend time with her and pretend that I’m in love with her. It feels like I’m cheating on you.”

“You’re not.”

“I know I’m not,” Derek said. “But it feels that way.”

I nodded. I knew how he felt. Sometimes when I was on set and saw them together, it felt like I

was the one cheating. Like Derek and Ursula were the real couple and I was the one in the middle.

Ursula’s glares and occasional snippy comments certainly made it feel that way. And the way the

other chorus girls treated me, I felt like I should be wearing a huge scarlet letter.

“It’s only a secret for a while,” I told him, putting on a brave face. “We’re actors, aren’t we?”

26

DEREK

“HELLO DARLING,” Ursula said, linking up her arm with me and leading me back inside Estrella, the

romantic Italian restaurant I’d ditched her at a few weeks back. “I thought we’d give this place

another try.”

I nodded numbly. “Sure. Why not.” I sounded about as excited as I felt, which is to say, I was

dreading every waking moment with Ursula lately. She was driving me up the wall.

“Smile,” she whispered in my ear. I complied reluctantly, and she kissed me on the cheek. “Thank

you.”

Ursula had arranged for us to sit in the middle of the restaurant, as usual. I’d learned that she

wasn’t happy eating unless the people around her had a 360-degree view. We settled in at the table

and I saw Meg Butler sitting at a table just to our right. She winked at me and I smiled a shit-eating

grin back at her.

I couldn’t wait for this movie to be over. If the early footage hadn’t been so amazing, I would

have dropped out already. But despite all of Ursula’s posturing, jealously, and cruelty towards Ariel,

she was doing an incredible job on set. Her singing was obviously world class, her dancing was

perfectly credible, and her acting had never been in doubt. She was a legitimate triple threat.

The studio was so excited over it they could barely contain themselves from promoting it before

we even had a final cut. I knew this production would be the one to push me over the top on my

EGOTs goal. All I had to do was endure the filming. And the after-hours Ursula commitments like this

one, awkward as they were.

“So,” Ursula said, sipping at her mimosa and staring at me down her nose condescendingly, “did

you see the coverage of the Halloween party from last week?”

I shook my head at her. “No. I missed it. Was it what you wanted?”

“It’s exactly what *we wanted*,” Ursula replied. “Remember, you’re getting something out of this

too, Derek. This isn’t just my dastardly plan. You benefit quite a bit.”

I nodded blandly. I knew she was right, but I definitely wouldn’t have traded my Friday night with

Ariel if I had any choice. As much as I wanted my Oscar, I was beginning to think I might want Ariel

more.

“In fact,” Ursula was saying, “the press loves us together so much, I was thinking we should take

it up a notch.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?” I wasn’t making out with her on camera. If people wanted to

see that, they could watch the movie. I didn’t want to do it more than absolutely necessary.

“What do you think about getting engaged?” Ursula asked, batting her eyelashes at me.

I froze. “What?”

Her expression was pitying. “Engaged. Betrothed. Promised. Pledged—”

“I know the definition of the word,” I stuttered. “I just wasn’t sure I heard you right.”

She smirked at me. “You did.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Ursula was clearly dead serious. “Why are you looking at me like I just suggested you get a cock

piercing? It would only be for show. And temporary. God, you’re so difficult. Why can’t you just get

on board here? I’m helping us both. I feel like I shouldn’t have to drag you kicking and screaming the

entire way. I know you’re in love with me.”

“I’m not pretending to get engaged to you.”

It was simply a step too far. I’d have to explain that to my family. It would be awkward. My

brothers would never let me hear the end of it. And Ariel? It wasn’t fair to her. These secrets were

getting out of hand.

“Look, I agreed to the terms of our deal. I’d be seen with you in public for the duration of the

filming and promotion of the film.”

“Yes,” Ursula said. “That’s right. You did agree to that. And in exchange for what, exactly?”

“Do you really want to rehash your blackmail deal over breakfast?” I asked. “How about we just

eat our waffles and smile at each other?”

I wanted to get home to Ariel. The thought of her waiting for me, of her knowing I was out with

another woman, made my blood boil. I hated lies and secrets.

“I just want to remind you of our deal,” Ursula said. “I agreed not to ruin your mistress Ariel

Cross’ fledgling little career and in return you agreed to help us both promote this movie as a couple.

But there was one other thing I asked. Do you remember what it was?”

I frowned. “She’s not my mistress. But what are you getting at?”

“I’m getting at your lackluster performance on your side of the deal. Ariel Cross spent the night at

your house last night. And last Friday, too.”

As soon as I swallowed my bite of waffle, my mouth fell open. “Are you having her followed?”

“Meg pretty much lives at your house these days,” Ursula replied. “She gave me a call. Thankfully

nobody else saw her, but now we have a problem.”

I sucked in a stunned breath. “What I do in the privacy of my own house is really none of your

business or Meg's."

"Wrong."

"Excuse me?"

"You promised to stay away from the chorus girl. I'm the one you're in love with, remember?

Meg's got pictures of Ariel at your house. That puts everything at risk. It's not like I trust the

paparazzo, but I do trust that she'll release the photos if we don't take action."

"And the action you want me to take is to get engaged to you."

"Yes," she said, shaking her head. "I'm glad you're catching on."

"Why is this so damn important to you?" I asked Ursula. "I'm here right now doing this

appearance, aren't I? Why isn't that good enough?"

Ursula sighed and leaned over to the table that Meg was sitting at. She'd been fiddling with her

phone, but I had no doubt she'd been listening.

"Can I have those pictures from last Saturday, please?" she asked.

Meg plucked a yellow file folder out of her purse and handed it to Ursula. Ursula opened them,

shook her head, and then slid them across the table at me.

I opened the folder up warily. Ariel was swimming in my pool. There were a number of photos,

all taken last Saturday morning. The photos were taken in such a way that it was obvious that Ariel

was naked, although there was no obvious nudity. How artistic.

“What the fuck?” I stuttered. “How?”

“Drones,” Meg said, not looking up from her phone. “Cheap, quiet, and excellent for peering over

walls.” She blinked up at me momentarily. “You’re an idiot. You could have easily avoided all this. I

did you both a favor and didn’t take any nudes. You’re welcome.”

“As you can see,” Ursula told me, “you’re clearly not adhering to the deal with me. That’s a

problem, love.”

I swallowed. “I’m not your love. This is ridiculous.” I stared at Meg. “Was this engagement your

idea?”

She shrugged. “Look, I’m just trying to protect my investment here. I watched you to make sure

you stayed on track. Now I have proof that you’re cheating on the lovely Ursula here. In order to make

sure I get my money’s worth; I suggest you two get engaged right now. Otherwise I might have to

release these compromising photos of your mistress.”

I had to admire her, just a little bit. Meg was smart enough to manipulate not just me, but also

Ursula. She was a very adept little monster.

Ursula grabbed my hand to draw my attention back to her. “Look. I’m trying to be reasonable. Get

engaged to me, right now, and you can continue seeing your little Ariel in private. Meg won’t release

the photos. Try not to let her get naked in the backyard though. That’s probably not the greatest idea

now that you know about the drones.”

I felt ill. “What do you want me to do?”

There was no way I was going to let Ariel get humiliated this way. I was trapped, again. I was

being blackmailed, again. This was all wildly out of control. I missed the days of being able to see

who I wanted to see and do what I wanted to do. This must be why my brother Tommy decided to tell

Hollywood ‘fuck you’ at the Oscars. This place was a seething cesspool and Meg Butler seemed to be

particularly adept at wallowing in it.

Ursula grinned and Meg got out her camera. “Oh, don’t worry,” Ursula said, “I already picked out

the ring. It’s in here.” She shoved a ring box across the table, underneath a napkin. “Go ahead and get

down on one knee, please.”

I got down on the damn floor. “One thing,” I said, looking from Ursula to Meg and back. “Destroy

those photos. I don’t want Ariel to ever know they existed.”

Ursula rolled her eyes. Meg shrugged.

“Fine,” Meg said. “Consider them gone.”

I shook my head. “No. Show me the proof.”

“Let me take the picture of you getting engaged to Ursula, and I’ll delete them in front of you.” She

stared me in the eye. “You can keep the hard copies.”

“Are there other copies?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. Just those. Honest. Printing is expensive.”

I sighed. I didn’t believe Meg for a minute, but it was the best I was going to get.

27

DEREK

“YOU DID WHAT?” Holden stammered when I went over to my uncle Connor’s for boxing the next

morning. I’d just announced my engagement to a woman I hated. “Why?”

“Blackmail,” I clarified, “It’s, um, it’s a bit complicated. We’re probably going to need a minute.”

These sessions were usually an opportunity for our family to reconnect by hitting one another, but

today I was using it for a very different purpose—explaining why I just got engaged to my loathsome

costar. Our usual leader and friend, Mark, was absent today. It was probably better. This was really a

family conversation.

Holden looked at Tommy, Peter, and Connor to see if they understood better than he did. They all

looked similarly blank. Holden shook his head at me pityingly. “Start at the beginning,” he ordered.

“Wait!” Tommy interjected before I could start. “Do we need alcohol for this story?”

I nodded seriously. “That wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

It was actually a very good call. We looked at our host and uncle, Connor. He put up a finger and

then pointed it at the refrigerator in the garage. “Beer,” he said simply. “But don’t tell Izzie. She’s

been breastfeeding and I promised to get rid of everything.”

We all helped ourselves to Connor’s secret stash and then I got started.

“Connor knows some of this,” I said, “but it’s basically the tale of one idiot getting outsmarted by

every woman around him.” I sighed. “I met this girl I really like. Her name is Ariel. She’s a chorus

girl on the production that I’m working on right now. But the studio got this bright idea that they’d set

me up with my costar for publicity purposes. I ended up walking out of the date with her and going to

meet Ariel. Meg Butler followed me." The whole group of assembled Princes winced when I invoked

her name. "And Meg got a picture of me and Ariel kissing. She threatened to release it and make me

look like I was a cheater unless I got her something better. So, I thought that maybe Connor's news

would be a possibility—" Connor glowered. I think he was still a bit annoyed I'd even suggested it.

"But that turned out not to be the case," I said hastily. "In the meantime, Meg went to Ursula. Ursula

pitched a whole plan to Meg that we give her a bunch of exclusives and tips of our relationship." I put

the word relationship in air quotes. "And for a while that worked. Ursula also made me promise not

to see Ariel to prevent more exposure."

"Can I guess what comes next?" Tommy asked.

I laughed bitterly. "Sure. Go ahead."

"You didn't stop seeing Ariel."

"Bingo," I said. "*I did not stop seeing Ariel*. I like her! But Meg found out. She went to Ursula.

They cooked up a phase two. Now I'm engaged to Ursula."

For a moment, they were silent. Then they all started talking at once.

"Wow, you're really stupid," Connor pronounced. "Truly stupid."

“This is why I checked the hell out of Hollywood,” Tommy said. “Meg Butler is the worst.”

“This is bad,” Peter added.

“Does dad know?” Holden asked.

We all turned to look at Holden. That was a good question. I hadn’t even thought about how I’d

tell dad.

“No,” I said. “He doesn’t know about any of this. Not yet.”

“Well, maybe you want to have an exit strategy before you tell him,” Holden offered.

I sighed at him. “What do you suggest?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “This same story, only without the details of how many times you were

outsmarted?”

Our dad was going to think I was a total moron. He already thought I was the dimmest of his four

sons. The whole singing and dancing thing had never really resonated with him. I was suddenly

dreading the conversation.

“Thanks,” I told him sarcastically.

“I mean you only have to do this for a few weeks, right?” Holden said, softening a bit. “It’s just a

temporary annoyance.”

“Yeah.”

“Lead with that.”

“So, why don’t you just publicly dump Ursula?” Tommy asked. “That should solve all your

problems in one go. Call up old Meg, tell her you’ve got something really good, and then dump Ursula

in front of the cameras. Meg’s already got her money’s worth out of you.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?” he asked. “You don’t owe Ursula anything.”

I cringed. “Meg has some, um, compromising pictures of Ariel. And Ursula will get Ariel fired

from the production if she doesn’t get what she wants. Ariel’s just a chorus girl. Ursula could easily

tank her career or even get her blacklisted. Plus, the studio is over the moon with our fake

relationship. They think it’s genius.”

“Oh. Well that is a problem.”

“I know,” I grumbled. “It’s actually several distinct problems, none of which I have a solution to.”

I had no solutions period. Not even a vague outline of a solution. I was at the very bottom of a

hole with no way to scramble out of it. The only thing I could think was to stay the course. The light at

the end of the engagement tunnel was eventually not being engaged to Ursula.

“So, how’s Ariel taking all this?” Holden asked. “Are you sure she knows it’s fake? Because I’ve

been working next to you for several weeks and I didn’t even know you were still seeing Ariel. I

thought you’d come around to the whole Ursula thing.”

I felt guilty that I hadn’t told Holden the whole truth. But he was busy trying to direct the movie. I

figured giving him personal drama to think about—which he famously hated—would only make things

worse. Now that I saw his worried face, I realized I’d made a mistake.

I nodded. “She knows it’s fake,” I answered, ”but I have to imagine it doesn’t feel great to be in

her shoes right now. I don’t think the secrets appeal to her much.”

“Yeah, probably not,” he conceded. “Ursula sounds awful, by the way.”

I took a deep breath. “You have no idea. She doesn’t even like me. This is all just motivated self-

interest.”

“Well, if she’s teaming up with Meg Butler, it’s probably bound to backfire on her eventually,”

Tommy said. “She’s trouble.”

“Not just trouble. That woman and her entire industry are poison,” Connor added. “Anyone who

gets in bed with her is doomed. And that does include Ursula."

It was my only consolation. Perversely, it did lift my spirits. Connor had a point. Nobody that got

in bed with the paparazzi ever came out on top of it. Making deals with the devil generally doesn't

pan out.

"To Meg," I said, lifting my beer. "May she utterly screw over Ursula Jones after she finishes

wrecking my love life."

My brothers and uncles lifted their own drinks. "To Meg."

"And to Derek and his super-fucked-up fake blackmail engagement to an evil harpy," Holden said

next.

"To Derek!" Tommy, Peter, and Connor intoned.

"Congratulations!" Holden cried.

Everyone toasted me and I couldn't help my laugh. This was all totally absurd. At least my family

cared about me, even if their care and comfort was delivered mainly through teasing. I knew they had

my back when it counted.

Meanwhile, Ariel didn't have the most powerful Hollywood dynasty on her side. She wasn't

really talking to me. She was probably very confused by the sudden engagement. I'd been texting back

and forth with her a little bit, but I could only imagine that she was reconsidering her decision to see

me in secret. Secrets were horrible, and they had a bad habit of turning into lies.

Ariel deserved better than secrets or lies. She was young, innocent, and totally deserving of

someone that was willing and able to be seen with her in public. Plus, she had to put up with Ursula's

cattiness on set and all the rumors that had been spread about her. Ariel was strong, but there had to

be a limit to her patience and perseverance. I had to figure something out soon, or I sensed I was

going to lose her just as I finally got her.

Tommy turned to me after the toast with an interested look on his face. "So, tell us all about this

Ariel girl you like so much. Who is she? When are you going to bring her around to meet us?"

I felt all the attention focus back on me. Great.

28

ARIEL

"LET'S get a look at that giant rock!"

"Wow, congratulations!"

"Oh Ursula, you're going to be the most beautiful bride!"

Derek and Ursula were pretend engaged, and no one could talk about anything else this morning at

work. All the chorus girls and most of the cast were fussing about her like a swarm of bees, and she

was vibrating beneath the attention. I wished I could melt into the floor.

Derek texted me about the engagement so it wouldn't be a surprise, but it still stung. Especially

when I saw the photos show up on the internet. It caused me physical pain to look at them, and I'd

looked at them a lot over the course of the weekend.

Derek had gotten down on one knee and presented Ursula with the single largest diamond I'd ever

fucking seen. Seeing it sitting on Ursula's hand this morning at the studio, I could barely even believe

it was real. But I'm sure it was. The megawatt shine coming out of it was enough to blind mere

mortals like me.

After Derek had given Ursula the ring and she said 'yes,' he'd kissed her. I knew, rationally, that it

was all pretend. But rationality didn't make me feel much better when I had to look at a picture of the

guy that I was in love with kissing the woman who was trying to destroy me. And she was definitely

trying to destroy me.

My contract was still giving me major heartburn. My dad had been working on the language for

days, but he hadn't figured out a way out yet. I had signed over my voice forever. I'd thought it was

only for this movie. But I'd been looking at it in a haze of excitement and optimism. I hadn't read it

closely enough.

And now it was probably too late. I had been trying to do research on my own to figure out if it

was actually even possible to legally own someone else's voice. It didn't seem like there was a lot of

precedent for such a thing, except with record companies. But Ursula wasn't a record company. She

was just a greedy bitch. Unfortunately, I didn't have that law degree my dad was always going on

about. I didn't really know what I was doing.

And that was true of a lot of things. Derek for instance. I had no idea what I was doing with

Derek. I was sleeping with him, but now he was engaged to somebody else. That was not normal. I

didn't know the rules of such a weird relationship, other than that I had to keep the whole thing quiet.

I was never a good liar, but I was getting better at it. I was lying about my hair color, my voice,

my boyfriend… I was a professional liar these days. And it was really starting to feel terrible.

As soon as I had the opportunity to get away, I headed to the dressing rooms for a nice cry.

Unfortunately, Ursula followed me.

“Aren’t you going to wish me congratulations?” she asked, shutting the door behind us and

trapping me inside with her.

Time to put my new amazing lying skills to the ultimate test. “Oh my gosh, congratulations

Ursula!” I said flakily, smiling wide and pretending it was the happiest I’d ever been. “You must be

so excited!”

Ursula smirked. “That was actually pretty good. I almost bought it.”

“Gee thanks,” I told her, letting my smile fall off my face. “I’ve been working on my acting.”

“Well, I hope you’re ready,” she told me. “Because I know you’ve been seeing Derek on the side.

I need that to stop. He apparently doesn’t have the balls to call things off with you, but we’re engaged

now. I’m going to need you to dump Derek and be very convincing, so he stops going back to you.”

I frowned. “What?”

“I know you’ve been seeing him on the sly,” she told me. “I get that he’s still got a few wild oats

to sow before he settles down with me, but that’s got to stop.”

I swallowed. “Derek told me you knew. He said it was taken care of.”

“Well, it’s actually not. Believe it or not, I don’t appreciate being cheated on.”

My heartbeat was racing. What the fuck was she talking about? Derek told me that the fake

engagement was supposed to smooth things over with Ursula. As much as I disliked the secrets, I

thought we’d already been through this.

“Your relationship with him isn’t real,” I stuttered. “You can’t accuse me of cheating when it’s all

a lie.”

“Is that what he’s been telling you? Oh, you poor, stupid little girl.”

My confidence wavered a bit, but I just couldn’t believe it.

“I’m not stupid.”

She laughed. “If you think he would ever want you over me, you definitely are.”

“I’m not going to stop seeing him just because you want him for yourself. You get to have him in

public,” I told her. “That ought to be good enough.”

“It’s not though,” Ursula told me. “I don’t like the thought of you seeing him, even if you are just

his piece on the side. I don’t want an STD.”

I was nobody’s side chick, but I didn’t say it. She was just trying to mess with my head. I knew

Derek wasn’t really sleeping with her. He promised me.

“Why? Why does it matter to you?” I asked instead. I refused to entertain her ridiculous fantasy

that her relationship with Derek was real.

“It just does. I worry that someone else is going to find out and then I’m going to end up on the

cover of some tabloid as the jilted lover.”

I shook my head at her. This couldn’t be happening.

“I’m not going to do this for you,” I told her. “You’ve already got my voice and my boyfriend in

public. You have enough. I should be able to have this. Go ahead. Get me fired. Try.”

I was at the end of my rope. I was sick of being pushed around. I was not nothing. The past month

had been increasingly resembling torture. I’d put up with the gossip and the backbiting and the

sidelong looks. I’d put up with having to work twice as hard as any other chorus girl because Ursula

was constantly undermining me. But I was not going to give up the guy I cared about because she

didn’t like it. I refused.

“He’s not your boyfriend. He’s my fiancé. But I was worried you’d say that.”

I blinked. “Well, too bad.”

She was calling my bluff. It was probably my last day on set.

“But if you won’t do it for yourself, maybe you’ll do it for him. If you care about him at all, save

him from himself.”

My lips parted. “What?”

“I happen to have come into possession of some sensitive information about Derek Prince. It’s

about his family, actually. Would you like to know what it is?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not a gossip columnist.” I tried to brush past her. “Let me go.”

Ursula shot an arm out to trap me in the room with her.

“Derek’s uncle Connor has an adult son. A secret son. A son that he didn’t even know existed until

recently. Were you aware of that?”

I gulped. “I don’t want to know this stuff.”

“Too bad,” Ursula told me. “You need to know. Connor’s son, his name is Jacob Wright. Connor

knocked up a girl when he was in high school and she never told anyone. Connor didn’t even know

she was pregnant. But now he knows. And because I’ve been carefully collecting collateral on the

Prince family to make sure I have Derek where I want him, I know. And soon, everybody in

Hollywood is going to know. Unless you break it off with Derek.”

“You can’t just keep blackmailing everyone you know into things. It’s not normal.”

She frowned at me. “I’m not normal. I’m extraordinary.”

Extraordinarily deluded, maybe.

“Ursula, do you really want to ruin the life of some guy you don’t even know. He’s a kid..”

She laughed. “He’s your age. But I was just a kid when I started in Hollywood. Nobody did me

any favors. This world is hard.”

“But he’s not in this world. Just because his biological father—”

“I’m not here to discuss this with you. I’m here to threaten you. You’re the homewrecker here.”

I swallowed. “If I don’t break up with Derek, you’ll go public on Connor’s son?”

“Yes. That’s right.” She smiled sweetly. “Break up with him today, please.”

We stared at each other for a long moment. I took stock of the sort of person that I was and the sort

of person that I wanted to be. Maybe I just wasn’t cut out for Hollywood, because hurting Derek’s

family, or his poor cousin whose only crime was being born, seemed too fucked up.

I didn’t want to be the reason that Derek’s family experienced a crisis. It wasn’t fair to them. So,

even though it was very unfair to me, I knew I’d be going along with Ursula’s plan. I’d leave Derek if

it meant protecting him. But there was one thing I needed to know.

“Why do you want him so badly?”

Ursula shrugged her shoulders. “I love him and he loves me. Unlike you, I’m actually someone

he’s willing to be seen with in public. I’m the one he loves. Not you. It’s sad that you can’t get that

through your head.”

“You must be in love with him to do all this,” I said. “I pity you.”

“Don’t pity me,” Ursula snapped. “The only one here who deserves any pity is you. You’re a

chorus girl. That’s all you’ll ever be. But I’m going to win an Oscar. I’m going to marry Derek Prince.

If I want my career to be what I want it to be, I have to be the perfect little starlet. I have to date the

right men, take the right roles, have the right voice. Do you think I wanted to do a movie musical? No.

I hate dancing. I’ve always hated it. But the studio gets what the studio wants. I’m not a member of the

Prince family with enough power and influence to have my own way in Hollywood. Not yet. If I must

change everything about myself to get what I want, then fine. I’m all in. I’m going to do what it takes.

If you want this, you’re going to become just like me. I’m just a couple of years ahead of you. And

Derek is mine.”

I felt my mouth hanging open. I actually felt bad for her. Genuinely. She'd clearly been drinking a

big old vat of her own Kool-Aid. But that didn't mean I didn't hate her.

I wished I didn't know that Ursula had a reason for acting the way she did. It sucked. I'm sure she

lived under incredible pressure to be perfect. She probably didn't start out as harsh and cruel as she

became. It had to be a result of being crushed by the Hollywood machine. Someone had probably

done to her exactly what she'd done to me with my voice. She'd been robbed of her expression.

But she'd turned that cruelty inward and now it was hers to use on me. I hung my head.

"Fine," I told her. "I'll do this. But I want one thing in return. You have to release me from the part

of my contract that says I can never sing on film again. I want that back. I don't care about the credit

on this film, but I need my voice back for the future."

She shrugged and I almost wondered if I saw a flash of humanity in her. "Okay. You can have that.

I'm definitely never doing another musical. But I'm taking back the residuals. You won't get any

money."

"Fine." I shook my head at her. "I don't want the money. I want my voice back."

“And I want my fiancé back. Break up with him today.”

I sighed. “As soon as I get the paperwork from you, I’ll do it.”

29

DEREK

EVERYONE ON SET came to shake my hand and tell me how lucky I was. Everyone except Ariel. She

didn’t look at me all day long.

The production was now in full swing, with multiple scenes being shot at once. It kept me very

busy. But it didn’t make the time go by faster when I knew that I desperately needed to talk to Ariel. I

was worried about her. The day seemed to crawl by, with every hour feeling longer than the last.

Even though I was singing, dancing, and smiling my way through the day, inside I was anxious and

worried.

By the time my schedule finally freed up enough to go looking for her, it was near to the end of the

day. Her car was still in the parking lot, so I knew she was still around. I combed the huge studio for

her, eventually finding her talking on the phone on an abandoned backlot built to look like a New York

alleyway. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but it was basically impossible as I got closer.

“So, it’s good,” I heard her saying. “The changes get rid of the bad clause that would have been

permanent.”

Whoever was on the other end of the line said something and Ariel’s whole body relaxed.

“Thank God,” she said. “It’s finally done.”

The other party must have asked a question because she tensed up again.

“I had to agree to something else,” she said. “Something I didn’t really like. But I didn’t have

much of a choice.” She sounded a little choked up. She looked up and saw me then. “Dad, I’ll have to

call you back in a little while,” she said. “Okay bye.”

I walked forward hesitantly, moving to sit next to her on the big overturned box next to the fake

dumpster. If we pretended there was a terrible smell, we could almost be sitting in a real rotting

alleyway.

“Hi,” I told her.

“Hi,” she replied. “Ursula is making me dump you.”

I blinked in shock. “She what?”

Ariel sighed. She drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, making herself small.

“You know about Jacob Wright, right?”

I paused. “What?”

Now that I was closer to her, I could see that Ariel had been crying.

“Your, um, cousin. I guess he would be your cousin, wouldn’t he?” she asked.

I nodded, too stunned to talk.

“Ursula knows about him too,” Ariel continued. She looked worried and pale. “She told me that if

I didn’t leave you and promise not to interfere with her plans anymore then she would tell people

about him. I can’t let some stranger’s life get ruined just because I like you a lot.”

It was in that moment that I realized I loved Ariel. She was willing to break her own heart to save

a stranger. And even better, she was totally and completely wrong. There was no crisis.

“Ariel,” I managed, my heart lifting at last. Ursula had finally screwed up. “You don’t have to do

anything. We’re releasing the news about Jacob tomorrow.”

She froze. “What?”

I nodded. “Do you want to hear the whole story?”

“I—I guess so,” she replied, looking stunned. “But are you serious? Ursula doesn’t have

anything?”

I shook my head. “No. She’s too late. We’re proactively releasing the news about Jacob, because

we knew it wouldn’t be possible to keep it secret after Connor learned about him. But we had to keep

it quiet for a while until we could find the right news outlet and control the narrative.”

“I don’t have to break up with you,” Ariel said, looking shocked. She laughed a little, surprised

laugh.

“Not unless you want to.” I paused. “I would understand if you did. This has all gotten pretty

fucked up.”

She laughed. “Well, that’s definitely true.” But then she shook her head and grinned. “But I’m so

relieved…”

“It’s a crazy story,” I told Ariel. “Connor’s girlfriend apparently got pregnant right after he

graduated from high school. She didn’t tell anybody that Connor was the father, I guess we’ll never

know quite why. She did list him as the father on the birth certificate, but she died of a pregnancy-

related infection a few weeks after giving birth. Jacob was raised in the foster system, never learning

who his real father was.”

“How did you find out about him?” she asked.

“Connor and Izzie just had their first baby, Scarlett. Because of some really weird legal stuff that

Connor did, Izzie had to formally adopt her own baby. Don’t ask. Anyway, when the lawyers started

to investigate the adoption, they found Jacob’s birth certificate. So, we were all sitting around with

Scarlett at her christening, talking about the adoption. Connor steps out of the room to take a phone

call and comes back in looking like he’d just seen a ghost. He says, ‘I’m a father’ and we all just look

at him like he’s an idiot. I mean, his daughter was right there in front of him being all adorable and

stuff. Then he clarified. He says, ‘I’m a father to a fully-grown man living in Texas.’ We stared. Then

he explained a bunch more and we started to understand. It took a long time.”

The Wright family had not been immediately excited to hear from us. They’d been unhappy. But

Jacob was an adult who could make his own decisions. He opted to meet Connor. They were trying to

figure out how to have a relationship. It wasn’t easy for anyone involved, but we were trying to take

things as slow as possible. I hadn’t even met him yet, although I was looking forward to it.

Apparently, he even had an interest in acting. If that was true, he was in good company.

Ariel’s mouth was hanging open. “That’s insane,” she managed. “But I just want to make sure I

understand one detail.”

“What?”

“I don’t have to break up with you to keep you safe. Ursula has nothing.”

I shook my head. “Again, not unless you want to.”

“She could still get me fired,” she said, biting her lip.

“It would be a lot harder now that we’re halfway through filming,” I said. “It would be awkward

to replace you. Expensive. The studio would demand a good reason.”

“So, we’re okay?” she stuttered. “We’re fine?”

“I guess that’s really up to you. We’ll still have to deal with the secrets. The lies. Ursula and Meg

and everything else. But we’re no worse off today than we were Friday.” I picked up her hand

hesitantly. “But you tell me, Ariel. Are we fine?”

She pounced on me in answer.

30

DEREK

ARIEL STRADDLED AND KISSED ME, pinning me to the box we were sitting on. Time stood still. I held

her, taking my first clean breath of the day straight from her lips. We were okay in this moment.

Maybe not forever. Certainly not in general. There were a lot of things standing in between us and any

lasting love. But in this moment, we were okay. She still wanted me and that made everything okay.

Like a taut rubber band, something broke in me. I didn't care that we were only vaguely alone. But

there were no drones in here. Most everyone had gone home. Ursula was certainly gone, off on some

'pre-pre-bachelorette' party with her friends among the chorus girls. She spent a lot of time with

them, probably because she was lonely. I didn't pity her. Her unpleasant personality would do that.

Ariel had taken off her little sequined costume to go home. She was dressed for her second shift

—waitressing clothes.

"Do you have to work tonight?" I asked her, whispering into her neck and plucking at her clothes,

wanting to peel them off her.

She looked down at me. "No," she breathed. "Sebastian found somebody to cover for me." She

shook her head, pulling the pins that kept it constrained in a demure bun and let it free. I ran my

fingers through the silky soft strands. "I thought I'd be spending tonight with a pint of ice cream."

"Want to spend it with me, instead?" I asked her.

She nodded. “Yes, I think I do.”

I was glad to the core of my being. My heart was pumping much more blood below the belt than

above it. I wasn’t thinking clearly.

I lifted her shirt, and she let me. She seemed as overcome as I was. Underneath she had on a plain

black sports bra. She took it off.

“We should go somewhere else,” I said, staring transfixed. She looked so good. So perfect. So

totally mine.

“Why?” she asked. “Nobody’s here.”

She had a point. I had a counterpoint, but it was muted. Distantly I knew I should have probably

taken us somewhere else. I should have cared. I didn’t. Then we were pulling off each other’s clothes

and I wasn’t thinking at all.

I maneuvered her under me, fumbling with my pants and destroying another pair of her underwear.

She was as ready as I was, which was a relief because I didn’t have the self-control to go slowly or

gently. I pushed into her all at once, probably faster and harder than I should have. But she stared up

at me, wide-eyed and eager, and the noises she made sounded nothing like pain.

I lost myself in her, chasing the pleasure that only she could give me. She was so tight, so hot. Her

little hands buried themselves in my hair, pulled at my shoulders, and ran down my back.

“I missed you,” I told her as I took her, hoping she knew, at least a little, how totally under her

spell I’d become. “I really missed you this weekend.”

“I missed you too,” she panted back, wrapping her legs around my hips. “But no more talking.”

“You’re awfully bossy tonight,” I laughed, grabbing her ankles and pushing them up until they

were on my shoulders. She was bent double now beneath me. “What’s gotten into you?”

Her eyes spoke volumes. “You have,” she whispered.

I was on the verge of coming undone and we’d only just begun. Love or something that felt a lot

like it ignited in my veins. I pushed harder, rocking into her with a reckless, wild abandon. She

matched me stroke for stroke, holding tight and urging me onward with little, musical noises.

I had no clue how long we went on like that, fucking like animals in the fake alleyway of a

Hollywood backlot. But no matter how many times I thrust into her it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t get

enough of her body, her lips, her smell. I couldn’t get enough of the noises she was making, although

they were getting louder and louder. If she got too loud, someone would eventually find us.

“Sshh,” I told her, putting my fingers over her mouth. “You’re getting too loud.”

Ariel bit her lip when she came, holding back a noise that might have got us caught. I felt her body

shake with the effort of it, quaking and pulling me right down with her. I came almost simultaneously,

staring down into her eyes and praying that I always felt this way about her.

31

ARIEL

“DO YOU LIKE ROLLER SKATING?” Derek asked me as we lay sweaty and spent next to one another. We

should really put on some clothes. Somebody could come by at any time. But it was so hard to move.

My body felt like it had been melted in a furnace and re-forged.

“Huh?” I mumbled. Thinking was hard too.

“Roller skating,” he repeated. “Do you like it?”

It took me a minute to remember whether I did or not. My brain was having a lot of trouble

processing information. Ursula had been wrong. She had nothing to blackmail me with, and it

wouldn’t be easy to get me fired. She’d given up the perpetual contract clause for nothing. And I still

had Derek. Things were better than they had been because I was honest with Derek about what she

threatened me with. Honesty was clearly the better policy. It was the one thing we had that Ursula

didn't.

But things sure weren't perfect. Derek was still publicly engaged to Ursula. That was a problem.

Plus, I still hadn't come out to Derek about being Ursula's voice. I knew I should, but I wasn't sure

how to do it. I promised myself to figure out a way. Things were looking up.

"Sure," I said eventually, reaching over to grab my pants and pull them back on. "I like roller

skating. At least, I did when I was little. It's been a while."

"We should go roller skating tonight."

I laughed. "In public? Isn't that tempting fate?"

"I know a place," Derek told me. "Down in the valley. We can leave separately, drive to our

respective homes, and take Ubers to meet there. Meg won't be able to follow us inside. Plus, I have it

on good authority that she's stalking Ursula tonight anyway."

I smiled. "Okay," I told him. "If you think we're safe."

Derek sat up, reaching for his own clothes. "You're always safe with me."

I kissed him. "You know that's not what I meant."

He frowned. “I know.” He sighed. “I can’t wait for this to be over.”

I shrugged into my shirt and looked over at him, sex-tousled and perfect. “It will be. Everything’s

going to be okay.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Now let’s go roller-skating.”

THERE WAS A VERY large birthday party for a twelve-year-old girl just getting started at the roller rink

when I arrived. Casey, whoever she was, had a lot of friends. It took me a few minutes to find Derek

in the crowd. He waved at me and I grabbed my skates and headed over.

“You know the owner of this place?” I asked Derek as I pulled on my skates.

He nodded. “You do too. Mia owns it.”

“The choreographer?” I cocked my head to the side. “Really?”

He grinned. “Are you really surprised? She’s a former derby girl.”

I laughed. Our fiercely glamorous choreographer was really something. “I can see that. I bet she’s

elbowed a few unfortunates in the face in here.”

“I’m sure she has,” Derek said, grabbing my hand and pulling me upright. I came to a stand

carefully, trying to remember how to do this. “And she’s given her staff the greenlight to do just that to

any known member of the press that comes in here with a camera. It’s one of the few truly safe places

in LA, and one of its best kept secrets."

"I'm glad we can be ourselves here," I told him, taking my first unsteady sliding stride. "Because

I'm probably going to fall on my butt a lot."

"I doubt that," Derek said, leading me toward the rink. That floor looked a lot slicker than this

carpet I was on. "You're pretty darn graceful."

"Sure," I said, frowning. "And if we were in a ballet studio I would be. But this is a whole

different thing."

"Dancing is dancing," he promised, pulling me over the threshold. "You'll be fine. Come on."

After a few circles around the rink, I realized Derek was right. Skating was like dancing. There

was even a big disco light to remind me of being in a club. I couldn't go backward like him or do any

impressive jumps, but I could stay upright. I could even brake if I did it carefully. But Derek could

skate circles around me.

The rink was in full party mode tonight. After a full day of feeling pent up and frustrated on set,

this was exactly what I needed. Derek and I went around and around the rink, holding hands, listening

to the music, and talking. It felt good to be normal for once, not looking over my shoulder or worrying

who might be watching.

“Where’d you learn to skate like this?” I asked him.

He shrugged his broad shoulders and grinned. “Hockey.”

I giggled. “Didn’t you grow up in Texas? They have hockey in Texas?”

“They sure do,” he replied, grabbing my hand and spinning me so I was moving backward for a

few beats until he swung me back out. “It’s not football in terms of popularity, but plenty of kids still

play on the indoor rinks.”

“Did you like it?” I asked. I had a hard time imagining Derek being much of a team player.

He shook his head. “I hated it. I was abysmal. I hated the teams. I hated the fighting. I’ve never

been a fighter, and I’ve never been good at taking orders.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Not for hockey. But it was fine when I switched to dance classes instead, even if it led to years

of teasing from my brothers.”

“They teased you for dancing?” I asked. What jerks.

He nodded. “According to my brothers, dancing is for girls.” He frowned. “And possibly gays.”

Nonsense. “I disagree.”

He smirked. “I was playing the long game all along. We hit puberty and I got to hang out with all

the cute ballerinas, and they were stuck with a bunch of gross, stinky, sweaty dudes in spandex. I had

the last laugh. In fact, I’m still laughing.”

“A straight guy in a dance class does have a natural advantage,” I admitted.

I’d been in plenty of ballet classes with one or two guys. Usually those guys were gay. But when

one was straight… he basically had his pick. A man who knew how to move on the dance floor

generally knew how to move in the bedroom. Or so they said. I’d never been the pick until recently.

Derek was oblivious to my memories. “I definitely did.”

I rolled my eyes at his prowess. “So, what you’re saying is that you dated a lot of ballerinas in

high school, and probably afterward too.”

“Yes, I did.” He seemed neither prideful nor humble about it. He was good with women. It was

just a fact. I couldn’t imagine confidence like his. Constantly being the most talented person in the

room must be a real rush.

“But you never met one you liked?” I asked.

“I met you.”

“Are you saying that you like me?” I asked, batting my eyelashes at him and praying I could do

that and skate at the same time. It seemed to be working okay.

“I more than just like you, Ariel.” He grabbed my hand and leaned in close to whisper in my ear.

“I’m in love with you.”

And then I fell on my butt. One moment I was gliding gracefully along. The next, I was sitting on

the floor, throbbing and confused. Derek doubled back to my side and knelt.

“Are you okay?” he questioned, reaching down to help me back up. I gaped at him.

“You’re in love with me?” I asked. My voice came out kind of squeaky.

He kissed me on the forehead. “Is that why you fell?” he asked.

“In love with you?” I stuttered.

He smiled. “Are you saying you fell in love with me too? What? Just now?”

I laughed. I guess I might as well admit it. I let him pull me to stand again, and then wrapped my

arms around his neck. “Derek, I fell in love with you sophomore year of high school. The very first

time I saw you on Broadway. My parents took me to New York City, and we saw Les Misérables.

You played Marius. I’ve been in love with you ever since.”

“I knew you were a fan,” he mumbled into my hair. He sounded happy. When we pulled away, he

was smiling.

I giggled, embarrassed but glad to finally be honest. “I’m definitely a fan.”

32

DEREK

ARIEL CAME HOME WITH ME. We probably should have taken separate Ubers back to our respective

homes, but being careful seemed a lot less important to me now. Ariel loved me. Who cares what

anyone else thought? We collapsed into bed and cuddled when we got home. We were too tired to

make love again after five hours of endless circles around the roller rink but being apart wasn’t an

option, either. Now that I’d found her, I never wanted to be away from her again.

We slept in each other’s arms, and I dreamed sweeter, better dreams than I could ever remember

having before. I saw a whole future laid out before us. It was still hazy and undefined, but it was

coming into focus. This was meant to be. It had to be. Because there was nothing I wanted more.

I woke up much earlier than Ariel and sat watching the sunlight creep across her body as it rose

and crossed the bedroom in bright, white light. I could wake up like this every day for the rest of my

life and be happy. I couldn’t stop smiling.

Eventually I got up and hopped in the shower, hoping that she'd hear it and come join me. As I

washed my hair I sang. I'm not sure where 'I Don't Know Much' by Linda Ronstadt came from, but it

was on my mind this morning. It was probably playing at the roller rink. It was a good song. But when

Ursula's beautiful voice answered me on the bridge, I froze.

How the hell did Ursula get in here? Did she break in? Was she standing in my bathroom watching

me shower? A thousand doomsday scenarios played through my brain in an instant.

Fearing the worst, I poked my head out and saw Ariel. It took a moment for my brain to compute

what my ears already knew.

It was Ariel singing with Ursula's ethereally beautiful voice. My jaw dropped open. No. Not

Ursula's voice. *Ariel's*. She was looking sheepishly at me as she completed the chorus alone. The

notes rang from her throat and resonated against the hard, tile walls.

I don't know much, but I know I love you

That may be all I need to know

I could barely breathe. I turned off the water, stumbling out of the shower and wrapping a towel

around my waist. Holding myself upright had suddenly become very difficult. I grabbed Ariel by the

shoulders, half to make sure she was real, and half for balance purposes. She looked up at me silently.

“Explain,” I stuttered, still with suds in my hair. “How—”

She shrugged the shoulders under my wet hands self-consciously. “Ursula offered me the part in

the chorus in exchange for my voice. She can’t sing.” Her voice was soft.

I was still gaping. “What? Ursula did what?”

Ariel repeated her explanation. She was staring wide-eyed at me. “You and Ursula came by

Sebastian’s a few weeks ago. The night we met, remember?”

I nodded numbly.

“You stepped outside, I guess,” she continued. “But I sang a number on the stage. Afterward she

approached me with a deal. If I would agree to be her voice on ‘She Done Him Wrong,’ she would

not only pay me a boatload, but she’d help me get a spot on the chorus line. So, I’ve recorded all her

vocal parts in the studio. All she has to do is lip sync to the music and dance around.”

My mouth was still hanging open and I forced myself to shut it with a conscious effort.

Ursula… couldn’t sing.

It made perfect sense. That’s why she was so careful about recording everything in the studio.

That’s why she refused to even practice with me. She wasn’t a perfectionist or an artist. She was a

fraud. That slippery bitch!

It also explained why she hated Ariel so much. Having her around reminded her of her own

inadequacy. She needed Ariel around to do any added songs or rewrites, but it must grate at her to

have her around. Especially when Ariel and I got together.

“Who else knows?” I asked, still trying to wrap my mind around the size of Ursula’s deception.

She’d told everyone that it was her singing, including Holden and the studio.

Ariel frowned. “Just her agent, Sebastian, me, the guy who did the recordings, and my dad. My

dad happens to be her agent’s lawyer, although I doubt that she knows that.”

I shook my head in disbelief. This was so much to take in all at once. But so much made sense to

me now that hadn’t before. Now that I knew that the singing voice that I’d fallen in love with

belonged to Ariel, it seemed impossible that it could belong to anyone else. Especially Ursula. There

are plenty of people out there who sound different when they speak and when they sing. But how had I

missed this? I felt like an idiot that I never picked up on it.

Ursula’s speaking voice was a low contralto, but “her” singing voice was a mezzo-to-high

soprano. That was unusual, but not unheard of. But Ariel’s speaking voice sounded just like her

singing voice. I should have realized this weeks ago. I had no doubt that Ursula thought that I already

had. That was, in hindsight, probably why she was so utterly hellbent of ruining Ariel’s career and

relationship with me. *She thought she was going to be replaced on the film*.

At first it probably didn’t bother her too much. Sure, Ariel could dance, but she was in the chorus.

But then, as time went on, Ursula saw that Ariel and I were growing closer. She realized that it was

only a matter of time until Ariel told me the truth. So, she was doing everything in her power to

threaten, cajole, and blackmail Ariel into silence and fear, and then ultimately into quitting. It had

almost worked until she went a bridge too far with Connor’s news. And now, because of Ursula’s

mistake, I knew the truth anyway.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I stuttered. “Why are you only telling me now?”

Her eyes were apologetic. “I couldn’t,” she whispered. She was shaking a little bit, perhaps cold

because I was dripping all over her. “I shouldn’t tell you now. It’s breaking my contract and I could

get in really big trouble. You have to promise not to tell anyone."

"But—"

She shook her head furiously. "You can't tell her! Seriously. She could still destroy me. She

almost has already. You don't understand. The contract I signed gives her all the power."

"But—"

"Promise me," Ariel said, staring at me and reaching out to cup my wet cheek in her hand. "I told

you because I trust you. But you can't tell anyone. Not even her."

I paused, considering. I didn't know what Ariel had signed, but I had no doubt that it was

ironclad. It would need to be to protect Ursula from bad publicity. As much as I wanted to go

screaming from the rooftops that Ursula was lying to everybody, I knew I couldn't. Not without

hurting Ariel in the process.

Ariel was still looking at me anxiously. "You have to promise that you won't tell anyone," Ariel

said. "All of my pay on this job is dependent on me keeping this secret, and I really need to get paid. I

know it's not an ideal way to start a career, and I'm sorry to have kept you in the dark for so long, but

believe me, I wouldn't do it if there were any other way."

I smiled at her, trying to reassure her. She looked terrified.

“I’m glad you told me,” I said eventually. “I know it was probably scary, but I really appreciate

your trust.”

“You won’t tell, right?”

“I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

Ariel nodded. “I’m so glad you finally know,” she said, sighing. Her smile was small, but

genuine. “I shouldn’t have broken my word to her, but Ursula’s broken every promise she made to us.

She just keeps coming and upping the ante. I feel kind of bad for her, honestly, but I’m tired of all the

lies. We need to stop having secrets and lies between us. This has been eating at me for weeks and

weeks and I just wanted--"

I cut her off with a kiss.

She wanted me to know because she trusted me. Because she loved me. And now that I knew the

truth, this would change everything. I wasn’t sure how it changed everything when I couldn’t tell

another soul, but it did. Ariel was wearing my T-shirt and I pulled it off of her, stripping her down

and pulling her back into the shower with me. I wanted to sing with her. But first, I wanted to shower

with her. We'd figure everything else out after that.

33

ARIEL

"WHEN DID you first realize that you wanted to be a singer?" I asked Derek. We were lying in the bed

again, only wetter this time from the shower sex we'd just had. It felt so good to be honest with him.

"I wanted to be one since I can remember."

He propped himself up on an arm and looked at me.

"I guess I was pretty young," he replied, pushing the hair back from my forehead and smoothing it

behind my ear. "My brother Tommy and I grew up watching our uncle Connor be in movies and I

always wanted to perform like he did. Tommy was slower to get the acting bug. I almost think it was

just pure competitiveness with me that pushed him into it. But I always wanted to act, sing, and dance.

Funny that he ended up being the more successful of the two of us. Maybe he's just better looking or

something"

I laughed. "Definitely not."

Derek grinned at me. "I'm very glad you think so. I'd hate to lose you to one of my stupid,

talentless brothers. Especially my twin."

There was no chance of that. Tommy Prince was good looking in a clean-cut, traditional kind of

way, but Derek was absolutely gorgeous. Tall, dark, and handsome didn't even begin to cover it. He

had the body of an athlete, the symmetrical, strong face of a model, and the talent of a Broadway star.

It was almost criminal that one person should be so blessed. Every time I looked at Derek naked, I

had to pinch myself to believe that he was even real. He had actual washboard abs. Like something,

well, like something out of a movie.

"I definitely think so," I told him. If he didn't hear the awe in my voice then he wasn't paying

attention. I'd been in love with him since I was a teenager.

"Well, my insecurity complex appreciates the vote of confidence," he replied. "Coming from such

a beautiful and talented woman that really means a lot to me."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Please. As if the great and powerful Derek Prince needs to be reminded

that he's beautiful."

"Men are sensitive. Especially theater nerds like me."

What a ridiculous statement. I'd known theater nerds in high school and college. Derek was about

as far from those mouth-breathers as it was possible to be.

“Do you really consider yourself a theater nerd?” I asked him. “You’re a major movie star. Nerd

implies that you didn’t make it. That you’re an amateur. You’ve totally made it.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “I guess it’s a relative term,” he said, laughing a bit. “Compared

to my brothers, I’ve always been the one who took the craft of acting the most seriously. I was doing

plays in high school. Going to dance classes. Working on accents. When they were playing sports or

going to college, I was the one focused like a laser on getting my first Broadway role. Then they all

got more famous than me anyway.”

“Can any of them dance?”

“No,” he admitted. “They can’t. Especially not Tommy. He’s so uncoordinated it’s a miracle he

could make it through the first dance at his wedding. He stepped on Cindy’s feet. I saw it with my

own two eyes.”

“Can any of them sing?”

He smirked. “Definitely not. They’re all pretty bad, but Holden in particular might even be tone

deaf. The man can’t even sing happy birthday without causing people to wince.”

“So, what are you worried about?”

“Who says I’m worried?”

“Your face.”

He shook his head. “I guess I’ve always just felt like I was trying to make up for something. I’m

the one who picked the hardest path, going outside Hollywood to try and make it big on Broadway.

They all had Connor to help them get started, but I went off to New York to make my name for myself.

And then they all got more famous than me.”

“Is that why you’re so obsessed with EGOTs?” I asked.

He frowned. “Probably.”

“Well, you’re going to get it,” I told him. “I’m sure you will.”

He smiled at me. “It’s nice to have you on my side,” he said. “I’m on your side too, you know.”

“I’m not sure how long I’ll have a side,” I confessed. “If I can’t get more roles after this one, I’ll

be packing it all up and moving home to go to law school.”

He blinked. “Law school?”

I nodded. “My dad really, really wants me to go to law school.”

Derek shook his head at me. “With a voice like yours, the last place you need to go is law

school.”

“You really think I’m good?” I asked him. “Be honest. I can take it.”

He laughed. “You’re so good that the first time I heard your voice, back when I thought it was

Ursula’s voice, I actually wondered if I wasn’t in love with her. Only it was you.” He paused. “That

sounded really stupid.”

My mouth was hanging open. “It didn’t sound stupid.”

He looked relieved. “Really? Good.” He kissed me on the side of my neck, and it sent a shiver

down my spine. “Because it’s one hundred percent true. When I heard your voice, it did something to

me. You have a talent that doesn’t come along very often.”

I could feel myself blushing. When you’re as pale and rosacea prone as I am, blushing can

sometimes almost hurt. Like a sunburn. I don’t blush all that much as a general rule, but Derek had a

real talent for bringing it out of me. “That’s a very nice thing to say.”

“It’s not meant to flatter your ego,” he told me. “I’m saying it because it’s true. No matter what

happens, you have to pursue show business. The world doesn’t deserve your voice, but it does need

it.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I just said, “Thank you.”

He shook his head at me. “You’ll see what I mean when the movie comes out. Everybody will like

the dancing. They'll enjoy the acting. But it's the singing that they're all going to be talking about. It's

you."

"Only they won't ever know it's me," I said sadly. "I know I agreed to Ursula's terms, but now

that we're getting closer and closer to the release of the movie, I'm starting to wonder if I made a

mistake. I knew I had to get my foot in the door somehow, but it's really hard to hear my own voice

and know that Ursula is taking credit for it." Derek was the first person I'd been able to say these

words out loud to besides Sebastian and it felt damn good. The frustration that had been boiling over

in recent weeks was clearly evident in my voice. "I don't like knowing that nobody will ever know

the truth."

Derek frowned. "I'm sorry. I can only imagine that feels horrible. I can ask my agent, Elaine, to

take a look at your contract if you want me to."

I shrugged. "No. My dad is a lawyer. I know he's looking into it too."

He nodded. "That's why he wants you to go to law school, isn't it? Because he's a lawyer."

"Exactly." I laughed bitterly. "He's convinced that I'll never make it in Hollywood and that I need

to come home right away and start law school to secure a real future for myself."

"Did you ever want to be a lawyer?" he asked. "I bet you'd be a pretty good one. You're smart,

patient, careful. Those are all good lawyer qualities."

I rolled my eyes. "Careful, you're starting to sound like my dad," I snapped.

"Yikes," he replied. "This is clearly a sore subject for you, isn't it?"

I defused in an instant. "Yeah. I guess it really is. He's just so adamant that I could never be

successful doing what I want to do. I think if he would just admit that I have some talent, even if he

thought being a lawyer was a better path for me, I'd be able to swallow it more easily. But he's just

so intense. Like there's no chance for me. That Hollywood will eat me up and leave no trace."

"Well, he does have a point about Hollywood being a dangerous place," Derek said carefully.

"But you're right that you have a lot of talent. I'm not just saying that, either," he replied when I made

a face at him that must have looked skeptical. "I know you have what it takes. I've seen what you've

put up with out of Ursula and the girls on set. If you can put up with that and the constant rejection in

general, then you're already halfway there." He wrapped his arms around me. "Plus, you've got me."

I smiled at him. “Do I have you?” I asked him. “After the filming is over and you and Ursula are

able to break up in public, will I have you?”

He squeezed me tighter. “Yes. You will have me for as long as you want me. For as long as we

can stand one another. As soon as this media nightmare is over, I’m yours. And you’re mine. Publicly.

Privately. Everywhere. I promise you that.”

“Then I guess all that patience you say I have is going to pay off,” I told him. “Because I’m not

ever going to give you up.”

34

DEREK

MY NEXT ‘APPEARANCE’ with Ursula came sooner than I was ready for. I just couldn’t avoid her. It

was that Saturday evening. We were attending a birthday party for an ancient, influential Hollywood

muckety-muck at his sprawling hillside estate. It was a beautiful night, and the band was uncommonly

good. All the important people were present and on their best behavior. Ordinarily I’d be down to

schmooze but being with Ursula dampened my spirits. Besides, I needed to talk to her.

“Shall we dance?” I asked Ursula, smiling solicitously and offering her my hand. I’d really been

making an effort with her tonight. I was luring her into a false sense of complacency.

“I’d love to,” she replied, letting me draw her onto the dance floor and away from the listening

ears of any onlookers. Ursula might be a terrible person, but she looked phenomenal tonight and she

was absolutely the belle of the ball. Everyone wanted to talk to her. She was totally in her element.

“This is a great party, don’t you think?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s fine,” I said, dropping the act. “Look, we need to talk.”

“I have something important to tell you, too,” Ursula said. “It’s a surprise. Your brother told me I

could be the one to tell you myself. It’s something I’ve been working on with Clint and our agents for

a while.”

That sounded ominous. But it would have to wait.

“Me first.”

She smiled and brushed my cheek affectionately. I avoided the temptation to wince. “Sure. Go

ahead, dear.”

“It’s about Ariel.”

Ursula rolled her eyes. “Ariel broke up with you, didn’t she?” Her expression was pitying. “Well,

it’s probably for the best. You really need to focus on your fiancé, don’t you think?”

“Actually, no,” I told Ursula. “She didn’t. The news about Jacob Hercules is already in the

waters. You can’t use that as blackmail, you’re about forty-eight hours too slow.”

Ursula’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“It sucks to be outsmarted, doesn’t it?” I asked her. “But honestly, did you really think that Ariel

wouldn’t tell me why she was leaving me? Or that we were intent on keeping the news suppressed

forever? Not everyone is as dishonest as you are.”

“She can’t go back on her word to me,” Ursula hissed. “I already fulfilled my end of the bargain.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh? How so?”

Ursula stared at me. She could either admit that she had a contract with Ariel that arranged for

Ursula to take credit for Ariel’s voice work, or she could lie to me. She was trying to figure out if I

already knew. The moment stretched.

I wondered what was going on inside her head at that moment. Ursula probably thought that

everyone was as cunning and scheming as she was. That everyone lived in a world full of lies and

little plots. It must be a complicated way to live. I almost pitied her. Almost.

“I didn’t get her fired,” she said eventually. “But now I will!”

Hmm. So, she chose to lie. Good to know.

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed in her ear, dipping her to conceal the outburst. “You don’t want

people to hear us arguing, do you?”

She was seething. “I want her gone,” she said in a much lower voice. Her hand holding mine was

gripping hard enough to cut off the circulation. I didn’t need my hand anyway. “I need her off the lot.”

“She’s not going anywhere,” I said, shaking my head at her. “Come on. This is beneath you.

You’ve won everything you wanted. Be satisfied. I’m here with you, aren’t I? I promise to keep

everything with Ariel under wraps. Unless there’s something else you’re worried about?”

Like, perhaps, everyone learning that you can’t sing?

I wished I could ask her that, but it would be betraying Ariel. I’d promised to keep the secret, and

that’s exactly what I’d do.

Ursula blinked her long, fake eyelashes. “I really want her gone,” she said, shaking her head at me

after a moment. “But I guess I can put up with her on set for a few more weeks.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“But I want something in return,” Ursula said. I frowned at her and she smiled sweetly at me. “It’s

tiny, I promise.”

“What?” I asked, wondering what fresh hell she was about to unleash on me.

“I want you kiss me when they announce the tour,” Ursula said.

I blinked. “What tour?”

She smirked.

Behind us, as if on cue, a drumroll started, and the music cut off. Everyone on the dance floor

turned. Holden and the old muckety-muck himself, Edgar Montrose, came out on stage.

“Thank you all for coming to my eighty-sixth birthday party,” Montrose said. He looked pretty

good for eighty-six, all things considered. Whoever did his Botox work was a real pro. He didn’t

look a day over seventy.

“I’m so pleased to have everyone who’s anyone in Hollywood here to watch me get another year

closer to the grave. I know the reason you’re really here is just to make sure I’m actually still alive.”

We all laughed semi-uncomfortably. Montrose was known for a lack of social filter, and it had only

gotten more pronounced as he aged. “But really,” he added. “It means a lot to me. It’s especially

important this year because Holden here is right in the middle of bringing my career full circle. Back

when I was just a kid in Hollywood, long before most of you were born, when dinosaurs ruled the

earth, this game was very different. But some things have stayed remarkably the same. Even back

then, back before movie theaters, when you went to the Nickelodeon to see a silent picture with a

musical accompaniment, we were all there to look at the movie stars and the wonderful stories they

told."

He smiled at Holden who beamed back at him. Despite his stubborn, recalcitrant personality,

Holden could still turn on the charm when he needed to.

"When I was starting in Hollywood, two of the biggest stars out there were Cary Grant and Mae

West. Now, everyone knows those names. They're enshrined in the history of the city. They are giants.

The film that Holden is remaking today, 'She Done Him Wrong,' was the first film I ever worked on,

and starred Mae and Cary. This remake, of which I'm the executive producer, will probably be the

very last film I ever do. Or at least if not the last, among the last. Everybody has to go out somehow,"

he said, grinning at the audience. "But I'm blessed to be able to end my career right where I began it.

Watching two of the brightest stars of new Hollywood, Derek Prince and Ursula Jones, stepping into

the very roles that I got to watch be created for the first time in 1933."

The audience clapped politely. People were looking at us from all angles, and I put on my most

winning smile. I had no idea what was going on, but clearly smiling was the correct course of action.

Ursula was doing it too. Although, I had a bad feeling she knew exactly what was happening. She

winked at me.

Meanwhile, Montrose looked at Holden, who nodded and took his cue cards from him. He must

be tiring. My brother took over for him, addressing the audience with a big smile on his face.

"When Edgar was starting out in Hollywood," Holden told the crowd, "it wasn't uncommon for

people to travel long distances to the few theaters that were open near their homes. Sometimes they'd

drive for several hours to see a movie. Time and technology have helped connect audiences all

around the world over the common stories we treasure. But there's still no replacement for live

shows. Recordings are wonderful, and new technology like virtual reality and augmented reality have

helped to bridge the gap between recording and real. But there's still nothing quite like a real show.

And that’s what we want to give people—something real. So, I’m pleased to announce that Derek and

Ursula will be embarking on a three-month publicity tour to coincide with the release of ‘She Done

Him Wrong,’ where they will perform their numbers live for audiences in twenty-eight cities.”

Live?

Ursula was smiling excitedly. *Ah, so not live then*, I thought to myself. Lip synced, clearly. If it

were live, she’d be screwed.

Then Ursula was raising a manicured eyebrow at me and pursing her lips. I reluctantly

remembered my end of the bargain. I smiled and I kissed her for the assembled crowd, pretending to

be happy. The audience clapped excitedly, but I was frozen. Three months? Singing live? Traveling

around with Ursula. Kill me now.

There was nothing I could think of that sounded less appealing than several more months at

Ursula’s beck and call.

Three months. Twenty-eight cities. And Ursula would be with me in all of them.

I took a deep breath and tried to take stock of my situation. There were people all around me, in

every direction. Most of them wanted to talk to me. A lot of them wanted to shake my hand and

congratulate me on my career, my engagement, or some combination of the two. I was overwhelmed

by the crowd.

Ariel and I were just starting. I couldn't just disappear for several months to travel around with

her nemesis and singing with her ghost. It would kill whatever we'd just created.

35

ARIEL

"YOU'RE free of the contract clause that would have made you Ursula Jones's vocal slave forever,"

my dad told me when I finally called him back. "But things aren't exactly sunshine and rainbows,

Ariel. If you hadn't hung up on me, I would have told you."

Great. I was going to get another lecture now. I just knew it. I took a deep breath and tried to

mentally prepare myself. Once he got it out of his system, he'd leave me alone for a while. It was

better just to listen.

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting on the edge of my bed and painting my toenails. I'd picked

out my favorite color, a bright, screaming red. I wanted something sexy for my date with Derek

tomorrow. We were going to go meet at a movie. We had it all worked out. We'd arrive in separate

cars and then leave separately. In the dark, nobody would know we were together.

"I mean you need to listen to me."

"I did listen to you," I said. "You told me about the problem, and I took action based on that. Now

it's fixed."

"Well, not exactly," my dad told me. "You gave up all your residuals in exchange for the right to

have your voice credited to you again in the future, but there's more to it than that."

"So what?" I groused. It sucked, but I'd live without it.

"So, you're going to be out of money and options very soon."

I shook my head back and forth, setting down the nail polish and focusing fully on the

conversation. My ugly toes could wait. "No. I'm going to get paid for my work on the film as a chorus

girl. And I'm going to get more roles after this one."

"Ariel," my dad said, trying for a reasonable tone of voice. "Ursula doesn't like you much. I don't

know what you did to make her hate you, but she does. She's already having her agent make the

rounds to the various casting directors to tank your chances of getting another role. She's going to get

you blacklisted. You may have wriggled out of the most damaging part of your contract, but it won't

help you any if you can't ever get another job, will it?"

"I—I'll figure it out."

I had no idea how, but I would.

I hadn't even considered that Ursula would just go out and slander me around town. I guess I

shouldn't have been so naïve. That sounded exactly like something she would do.

"You need to admit that this little experiment failed, Ariel." My dad sighed. "I know you wanted it

all to work out. You wanted this to be your big break. But the truth is that Hollywood is full of people

like Ursula Jones. This is what I wanted to protect you from."

"I'll figure it out," I repeated. "I know I will. Ursula isn't the only person in Hollywood. I've met

people on this production who think I have talent. Mia, the choreographer, likes me quite a bit. I bet

she'd hire me again. And the director likes me too. And one of the actors and I are actually dating--"

"Ariel, none of those people are your friends."

"Derek is my friend," I said. My voice sounded small and weak and I hated it. My dad had a

special talent for shaking my confidence. I knew Derek cared about me. I knew it.

My dad was silent for a beat. “Derek Prince? Are you talking about Derek Prince? The actor? The

one on the movie with you?”

“Yes.”

“*Isn’t he Ursula’s fiancé*?” My dad’s voice was deeply disapproving. My dad was a fairly

conservative person. I knew he wouldn’t like hearing this.

And I’d been dreading this conversation for other reasons, too. It was so hard to explain. And it

made me sound crazy. “He is,” I told my dad, “but it’s not for real. He’s really dating me—”

“Ariel!” he snapped.

“What?” I asked sheepishly. It did sound bad when I said it that way. I didn’t like the way it

sounded out loud at all. It made me sound deranged and pathetic.

My dad’s voice was frustrated. “Ariel, please tell me you aren’t sleeping with Derek Prince

behind Ursula Jones’s back.”

“Whatever you’re thinking, it’s not like that at all,” I told him. “Really. The whole thing about

them being engaged is just a publicity stunt. They aren’t really even together. They don’t even like

each other.”

“Ariel, please don’t be naïve,” my dad said, forming the words as clearly and slowly as one

would when talking to a small child. “You can’t believe anything a man like that says to you. Isn’t

Derek Prince the guy you had the poster of in your bedroom in high school?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But that’s beside the point.”

“It helps explain why you wouldn’t be able to see the truth.”

“This is the truth,” I told him, feeling frustrated that he thought me so foolish. “I’m not some

homewrecker here. He cares about me and I care about him and—”

He cut me off. “And you’re going to get married and have babies and live in a big mansion with a

big white picket fence and there are going to be ponies that live in the yard. No, not ponies. Unicorns!

And you and Derek will ride the unicorns with your babies all day long. Ariel, stop dreaming.”

“It’s not like you think it is!” I told him. “This is why I don’t tell you stuff, you know that, right?

This is why I keep things to myself.”

“Ariel, I love you, but you need to come home,” my dad said. “I know this is hard to hear, but

you’ve been manipulated and it’s bad. Derek Prince isn’t in love with you.”

“Why would you say that?” I hissed. Why would he say something so cruel to me? He didn’t

know.

“Because it’s the truth,” he said. “And sometimes the truth is painful. That doesn’t mean we

shouldn’t face it.”

“You don’t have any proof of what you’re saying.” I swallowed a huge lump in the back of my

throat. It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be.

“Neither do you. Has he told you that he loves you?” he asked. His voice was soft.

“Yes.”

“Does he take you out in public? Does he introduce you to his friends? His family?”

“No, but—”

His laugh was sad. “Ariel, think about it for a moment. Be rational. Why would he pretend to love

Ursula?”

“Because… because he’s being blackmailed into it. It benefits her career. See, it started out as a

studio plot. The studio was trying to set them up together to help promote the film. But Derek left a

date that he was on with Ursula to come see me. This paparazzo lady, Meg, she got a picture of us

kissing. Then Ursula made Derek pretend to be in love with her to keep it out of the news because it

made Derek look bad. And Ursula wanted the publicity of being in a relationship with Derek for the

same reason the studio wanted it. So, they're pretending to be together. He got engaged to her for the

same reason."

"You actually believe that crazy story?" My dad asked. "Ariel, I know that you are smarter than

this. In fact, I know you're a lot smarter than this. Please, see reason here..."

"It's true," I protested. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's true."

"Do you have any proof? Has Ursula told you that the relationship is fake?"

"Derek told me they cooked up the plot together."

"That's it?" he asked. "That's all you've got?"

"I trust him," I said stubbornly. He loved me. He said he did. I believed him.

"Ariel, you shouldn't. Men like that sleep with a lot of women. And sometimes they tell them

whatever they want to hear in order to do it."

"You sound just like her!"

"Who?" my dad asked, disconcerted.

"*Ursula*. She's been messing with my head this whole time. Gaslighting me. She said that Derek

was spreading rumors about me on set about being easy. Trying to make me believe that I'm the one

who’s being crazy for continuing to see him. *Like I’m the side chick*.”

“What’s a… side chick?” I was not surprised my dad had never heard the term. He wasn’t a

divorce attorney.

“Exactly what it sounds like. It’s the chick who a guy is seeing on the side, in secret.”

My dad was quiet for a few moments. “Ariel, I think you are the, um, side chick in this situation.

In fact, that’s exactly what you are. I want you to think back, think through every interaction you’ve

had with Derek. Try to make the pieces fit the other way. I think you’ll find that I’m right.”

“No. I—I need to go.”

My head was starting to hurt, and I didn’t know what to do.

“When you come to your senses, I’m here for you. I love you.”

For some reason, it was hearing him say that he loved me that made me start to cry.

36

ARIEL

“WHAT’S WRONG?” Sebastian asked the next afternoon when I reported in to work at the bar looking

probably just about as good as I felt. I’d been up all night. I felt like death warmed over.

I shrugged my shoulders. “This working two jobs thing is getting pretty difficult,” I lied, not

wanting to get into the real source of my angst. “I think it’s just too much for a person to do.”

“Do you need me to call in someone else?” he asked, pressing a hand to my forehead like I was a

feverish child. “You aren’t feeling good?”

I shook my head, pulling away from his palm. “No, no. I’m fine. I’m just ready for this production

to wrap.”

“You know what would make you feel better?” Sebastian asked.

I raised an eyebrow. “Beer?”

He laughed at me, shaking his head.

“You know what would make you feel better that you can still do while working?” he tried.

“What?” I asked reluctantly. Honestly a beer had sounded pretty good right about now.

“Go sing a song,” he suggested.

I frowned and sighed. “No thanks.”

He gaped at me. I never turned down the opportunity to perform. Not ever. Usually he had to keep

me off the stage. I’d been a ham since the day I was born. “Oh, don’t give me that ‘no thanks’

nonsense. It’s been weeks since you sang something here at the bar. I know you’ve been busy singing

in the studio, but we’ve been deprived of your talents around here.”

I looked up at him churlishly. “You just want me to be in a better mood.”

“Applause will put you in a better mood, sure, but I also just like to hear you sing,” he told me.

I shuffled around the bar, messing with the cups and pretending to work. “Maybe later.”

“Come on.”

I sighed. “Alright. Fine. I’ll sing. What do you want to hear?”

Sebastian shrugged. He’d recently lost his earring to a thieving Flapper and he looked strange

without it. It would turn up eventually. “Something upbeat.”

“Okay.” I didn’t feel upbeat at the moment. Far from it. But I went around back to look at the

catalogue anyway.

Upbeat… I needed something upbeat. Sebastian wanted something happy. I browsed through the

songs, feeling like I could crawl under a rock and sleep for a week. None of the choices seemed right.

Happy by Pharrell Williams was popular these days. Eh, it didn’t feel right. I wasn’t feeling

peppy enough.

I’m a Believer by the Monkees? No thanks. Not tonight. Too repetitive.

I Will Survive by Gloria Gaynor? Great song, but it didn’t resonate right now. I didn’t feel like

much of a survivor.

Good Vibrations by the Beach Boys? It was happy, but damn near impossible to sing. Brian

Wilson clearly hadn’t written his songs with karaoke in mind.

Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries, by Judy Garland. Hmm. Closer.

Girls Just Wanna’ Have Fun by Cyndi Lauper. I did like that song. But it wasn’t quite on target.

Maybe if I slowed it way down and made it depressing. But that would just confuse people.

Eventually, I saw it. Get Happy/Happy Days Are Here Again, the duet between Barbara Streisand

and Judy Garland. Perhaps the saddest song about happiness that had ever been arranged. It was

perfect. I set the duet to let me sing Judy Garland’s part and got situated on the stage.

The lyrics were happy enough, but the arrangement was simply heart breaking. It was a song that

was meant to be sung wearing a black dress and a funeral veil. It could bring a whole room of people

to tears. I belted out the song with Barbara, looking out into the audience and feeling utterly empty. I

put all my emotion into my voice, all the insecurity. The fear. The little doubts that had been growing

and festering over the past twenty-four hours. It flowed out of me on the melody, leaving me lighter

but hollow.

While I was singing, I felt like everything was clear. The feelings that had been swirling inside

me and attempting to overtake me subsided. The song made sense. So long as I had the melody to

sustain me, I didn’t have to think. I just needed to sell this song to the people in front of me. And they

watched, spellbound. It felt so good to have them listening to me.

It might not have been the most uplifting, but the standing ovation I got afterwards at least got butts

out of seats. I smiled and took a bow, soaking up the applause and hoping it would fill me back up. It

didn’t. I returned behind the bar, looking over at Sebastian who raised an eyebrow. I shrugged. I

didn’t have anything to say.

Derek cancelled our date. He said he had something he had to talk to the studio about. He’d

promised me that he would explain everything tomorrow, but I didn’t know if we’d have a chance to

talk. It was hard on set. We couldn’t let people see us together.

I’d listened to my dad. I replayed every conversation. I tried to find proof that Derek wasn’t

leading me on. I looked through my memories, watching them like a movie in my mind. And I came up

wanting.

Ursula never slipped or faltered. Her act, if it was an act, was perfect. If she was really playing a

game with me, then she outplayed me soundly. Because as far as I could remember, she never

admitted that her relationship with Derek was anything less than real. And when I looked at the whole

situation through my dad's lens, it sure did seem like I was the side chick.

And no, Derek never took me out publicly. He never introduced me to his friends. I'd never met

his family. And the worst part of it all, when I looked back on it now, was that it had been my idea.

I'd let him keep me a secret. I'd been so willing to go along with it. Because I desperately wanted

to believe Derek. And I still couldn't quite bring myself not to believe him.

But my dad was smart. He was very smart. Brilliant. For all our differences of opinion and ideas

about what my life should be like, my dad wasn't the type to actively sabotage me. He would never

do that. He loved me. Was I willing to believe Derek, a man who was publicly engaged to another

woman, over my own father? Wouldn't that make me the worst daughter of all time?

I was all twisted up inside. It was making me crazy.

“Hi,” a guy said, snapping me out of my reverie. “Can I get a beer over here?”

I blinked. Oh right. I was supposed to be working. I plastered a big, happy smile on my face.

“Of course,” I said, looking at him and pretending I wasn’t festering in doubt. “What would you

like?”

“What have you got on draft?” he asked.

I started rattling off the beers until he picked the one he liked. *At least I could do this*, I thought to

myself . *I can always fall back on cocktail waitressing.* No matter what happened, I could still work

at Sebastian’s.

“You sang pretty well up there,” the guy said to me when I delivered his beer. “Have you ever

done anything professional?”

I shrugged. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s just a hobby.”

A hobby. Ugh.

My dad would be so happy. I hung my head and got back to work. Maybe he was right. If Ursula

had really gotten me all but blacklisted, it would probably be better for me to move back to

Sacramento when the production wrapped. I wouldn’t be able to get another job. And God knew that I

was almost broke. I was making just enough to keep my head above water, but it wouldn’t last.

At least I’d have a great story. I could grow up. I could go to law school. I could become a lawyer

and marry some boring guy that my parents liked. Probably another lawyer. And one day when I had a

daughter of my own, maybe I could show her ‘She Done Him Wrong’ and tell her that was my voice

she was hearing. I could point out the little blonde in the sequined leotard in the background and say,

‘that’s me.’ And she would ask me if I knew the two people playing the leads. And I could tell her no.

They’re movie stars. I was only ever just a chorus girl. I was never cut out to be a star.

37

DEREK

“I DON’T WANT to do it.” I sounded whiny and immature. I didn’t even care.

“Well, unfortunately you don’t actually have a choice.” My agent, Elaine, was frowning at me

over her desk. I was here, miserably getting lectured on the requirements of the contract I signed

instead of out with Ariel at a movie. Behind Elaine, the sprawling city of LA filled the picture

window, displaying a whole city built on millions of movies. A whole world built on films and

Elaine couldn't get me out of my commitments on one of them.

"There's got to be a way," I protested. "Can we call the lawyers?"

Elaine sighed. "I already called them. We had a two-hour conference call this morning before you

got here. I do my job, you know. When you said you didn't want to do the tour, I called them up and

put them through their paces. They looked at the contract and chewed on it and digested it right in

front of me, for hours. And this is the final distillation of all that digestion. You're stuck."

"Three months?"

"I thought you'd be happy there was so much buzz around this film. I've been negotiating this tour

on your behalf. If you'd told me you didn't want to do it, things would be different right now. You

walked right into this."

"I can't do it."

"Don't tell me you're going to pull a Tommy, Derek."

My brother Tommy had recently walked away from an Oscar win to go and finish his math degree.

He was, in my opinion, totally and completely insane. But he was also in love. His wife was

attending with him. They were having a blast.

But Elaine had not been happy. She'd invested a lot of time into Tommy. She'd invested a lot of

time into me, too, as well as Connor, Holden, and Peter. The idea that I might be the second member

of the Prince family to suddenly peace out on Hollywood obviously had her spooked.

I laughed at her worry, thinking that going to pursue a bachelor's degree in anything was going to

be a very hard sell for me. Tommy was the smart one. I was the fun one. And the talented one. I'd

been pursuing this dream my whole life and it hadn't lost its shine yet.

"I'm not going to pull a Tommy," I reassured her. "Trust me, I'm still enjoying my acting career

quite a bit." That was generally true, although the last couple of weeks had been a bit bumpy. "More

importantly, I really suck at math."

"Well then suck it up," Elaine told me. "You agreed to promote the film the way the studio saw fit.

This might be a bit unusual, but it's only because they can smell a huge hit in the making. If the buzz is

to be believed, this is going to make 'A Star is Born' look like that horrible piece of crap that Hugh

Jackman and Zack Efron put out a couple of years ago."

I wracked my brain for the reference. “The Greatest Showman?” Yeah, it hadn’t been great. There

were a few good numbers, but it hadn’t quite held together despite the combined talent of a fantastic

cast.

She nodded. “That’s the one. Drivel.”

“I’m happy the film is going to be successful—” I started.

“Then you can happily promote it, right?” she replied. She looked at her watch. “Derek, this is not

going to be something we can negotiate.”

“Ursula is driving me insane,” I confessed. “She’s got me over a barrel, trapped in this fake

relationship with her and now we’re engaged and—”

Elaine’s eyes were huge. “Stop. Stop.”

“What?”

“Go back to the beginning.”

TWO HOURS later and Elaine had cancelled her next three appointments. We’d broken open a bottle of

tequila she had in her desk.

“Well, that’s quite a story,” Elaine pronounced. “I’m not sure what we can do at this point, but if

you’d gotten me involved at an earlier stage, I probably could have helped quite a bit.”

“I didn’t think I needed help,” I admitted.

“Well, live and learn. You do need help.” Elaine looked exasperated. “Professional help.”

I nodded. “Yes, Elaine. Yes, I do. Can you help me?”

“We can manage the PR situation. I’ll call Ursula’s agent and have a chat with her. She’s a

reasonable woman. I’m going to hope that she wasn’t involved in the blackmail thing. Probably not. It

would be pretty low. If I had to guess, Ursula’s working this alone. But she’s a lot smarter than the

average starlet, that’s for sure.”

“Well, she’s also got Meg Butler on her side.”

Elaine raised an eyebrow. “Meg Butler’s on her own side. As soon as Ursula stops providing her

with good scoops, she’ll abandon her like a hot potato.”

“Well, the sooner the better,” I snapped, ready to have Meg Butler out of my life, permanently.

The more she was interested in me, or my relationships, the worse my life had become. She was

poison.

“Not necessarily. She can be useful. We need to make it so you come out looking good here. I’m

not sure how we do it either, although I’ll come up with something. Temporarily, you’re going to have

to keep seeing Ursula."

"The engagement—" I stuttered.

"The engagement stays."

"But—" I was back to being whiny.

"We can't dissolve the engagement that easily. We keep it for now and then once the fervor

subsides, we can just quietly cancel it."

"What about Ariel?" I asked. I was genuinely worried that our fledgling relationship couldn't

withstand much more pressure. The media blitz surrounding the release was going to be really hard

on us both.

Elaine blinked. "What about her, Derek?" Her voice was sympathetic, but firm. "Ariel has her

own contract with Ursula. She's got her own problems and she probably needs her own agent. But I

can't help her."

I paused and hung my head. "Fine. I get that, but I can't go on this tour. It'll destroy us."

Elaine stared me in the eye. "Derek, what do you want more? A chorus girl or your Oscar?"

"Is that what you asked Tommy? And how did that turn out?"

Elaine's eyes were wide. "Are you threatening me with a math degree? I thought we just agreed

that was off the table.”

“No. I’m not threatening you with anything. But it can’t be a choice. I want to make sure there’s a

path to both Ariel and my Oscar. I’m not Tommy. I’m me. And I think I can have both. I’m willing to

work for both, but I don’t believe in no-win scenarios. That’s why I have you, isn’t it? To do the

impossible?”

She blinked. “Okay. That’s fair. Let me see what I can do. In the meantime, though, you’ve got to

stick to the PR. Keep Ursula happy. Keep Ariel hidden. Let me talk to the lawyers, and Ursula’s

agent, and then probably more lawyers.” Her expression turned cunning. “I mean, we do know that

Ursula isn’t really—”

“No!” I said, sitting up. “You can’t tell anyone about that. It would violate Ariel’s contract and get

her in trouble. I shouldn’t have even told you, but I only did it because I knew I could trust you

implicitly.”

Elaine blinked. “The fact that she’s lying to the studio is just about the only bargaining chip we

have to get her on our side to cancel the tour. If both of you want to pull out of the publicity tour it

might be our only chance of killing it.”

“There’s got to be something else.”

She thought about it for a moment. “Well, there might be. There could be some bit of dirt we can

use as leverage, but you aren’t going to like the source of said information.”

“Meg.”

“That’s right. She’s the gossip queen. If anyone knows something incriminating about Ursula that

we can use to flip her on the tour, then we have to approach her.”

“I assume you don’t mean me, personally.”

She looked at me like I was a moron. “Derek, listen carefully, don’t ever go within twenty feet of

that woman. *I’ll call her*.”

“That’s what I figured.”

Elaine sighed. “Okay Derek,” she said, “I’ll start working on this. I’m going to try to find a way

out for you. I can probably get you out of the engagement. I might be able to get you out of the tour. But

it’s going to cost us something, and I do mean monetary. I need to know how far you’re willing to go.”

“I don’t care about the money. But I’ll give up anything but Ariel.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Are you sure. Anything?”

I nodded. “Anything.”

She nodded her head. I saw the gears starting to turn behind her eyes. “I can work with anything.”

She looked down at her watch and winced. “You better go. I need to make a few calls before it gets

late.”

I rose to go. “I appreciate your help, Elaine. I really do. And you never need to worry about me

going to Stanford. I doubt they’d take me back.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said. “But I’ll do my best.”

“I trust you.”

She looked grossed out at my sincerity. “Don’t get emotional on me, Derek. Now go home before

I change my mind,” she paused, turning contemplative. “Or decide to raise my rates.”

I left in a hurry and I heard her laughing as the door swung shut. Hollywood was a weird place.

38

ARIEL

“DO YOU SMELL SOMETHING?” Jess asked Flo, looking around the dressing room. I’d just walked in to

fix my hair before we started shooting for the day.

Flo frowned and then looked around herself. “Yeah. You know what? I do. Something is in here.

Something nasty.”

“*It smells like something died*,” Jess replied. Her voice was utterly disgusted. She stared right at

me, just in case I didn’t get the hint.

Flo turned to me as well. “Yeah. It’s a rotting, rancid-type smell. Like a dead rat. Like something

that shouldn’t be in here.”

I didn’t smell anything. But then again, I knew they meant me. Subtlety wasn’t exactly Flo or

Jess’s strong suit.

“Let’s get out of here before the stink rubs off on us,” Flo said to Jess. “I don’t want to be

contaminated.” She held her nose like the smell was so much that she could hardly stand it.

Jess nodded, pretending to retch. “Ugh. Me neither.”

They sauntered off, taking several other sheep—I mean girls—with them. I was left standing

awkwardly. The other girls that remained in the dressing room wouldn’t even meet my eyes. One by

one, they left too. Soon, I was alone.

I’d been alone a lot lately.

The vibe on set had been getting worse and worse. Ursula had really worked her magic on the

other chorus girls. Practically nobody spoke to me now at all. I’d become untouchable.

Jess and Flo had become the ringleaders of a full-scale assault on me. They were doing their very

best to make me miserable and it was wildly successful. Between keeping my relationship with Derek

a secret and the unrelenting nastiness from Flo and Jess, I was almost at my wit's end.

The rumors had been swirling for weeks at this point. They'd gotten nastier and nastier. Ariel is

sleeping around with Derek. Ariel will sleep with *anyone*. Ariel was going to be fired because she

can't dance, but she slept with some producer and he saved her job. Ariel is trying to steal Derek

away from Ursula, and everyone should watch out for her. In reality, Ariel just wanted to come to

work, do her job, and avoid any more drama. But that seemed to be impossible.

Even the few girls who didn't seem to buy into the campaign against me were avoiding me now.

Not all the girls were bad people who jumped on the bullying train, but they weren't exactly sticking

up for me either. I guess I understood why. It didn't do them any good to get on Ursula's bad side on

my account. The best I could do was to keep my head down and ignore it.

It's not like I could publicly confront Ursula. That would obviously cost me my job. So, I was

stuck between a rock and a hard place, constantly being demeaned and whispered about. It didn't

make for a pleasant work environment at all.

I settled in at my spot in front of the mirror, sighing. Then I saw that someone had been messing

with my makeup bag. It wasn't where I left it yesterday. Worry shot through me.

What if they did something to my stuff? I unzipped the bag, already dreading what I might find.

Sure enough, somebody had slipped a note in there, written in what looked like my own red lipstick.

It looked like blood though.

You don't belong here.

Original. So original. They wrote it on the mirror last week. Honestly, that had been scarier. This

was just lazy and repetitive.

I crumpled it up and threw it in the trashcan, and then had to do a doubletake at the can. Most of

my stage makeup was in there, and it looked like it had been stomped on first. Frustration and anger

welled up in me. This was the third batch of stage makeup I'd lost on set so far. The other two had

just disappeared along with some of my other things. But this time they were actively sabotaging it

and just letting me find the evidence. They weren't even being subtle anymore (although the mirror

threat hadn't exactly been subtle, either).

It was really my own fault. I should have locked everything up in my locker before I left. I knew

that it wasn't safe, but I'd been hopeful that they'd just give up after a while. Didn't it get boring to

endlessly torment someone? Apparently not. My attempt to take the high road had clearly been

unsuccessful.

Things had really been escalating lately with the bullying. I'm not sure Ursula even knew what

kind of a monster she'd created by turning Flo and Jess into my tormentors. Dancers are cutthroat.

They'll trip you down the stairs with their pointe shoes and then sashay away like it was nothing.

We only had one more day of real filming left, and I was anxious for it to be over. We were

shooting the finale scene today, the big, show-stopping chorus number. I'd be dancing a solo today.

And I'd be wearing regular damn makeup from my purse because I was out of the oil-based stuff that

lasted all day, which meant I'd be reapplying it ad nauseum. But it would have to do. I was in the

background anyway. Nobody would really be looking at me.

I put on my makeup with all the pep and enthusiasm of someone about to attend a funeral. This

was supposed to be a happy time. I was finishing up my first movie. I was going to dance a solo

today. But I wasn’t happy. Not at all.

Not only did all my fellow chorus girls despise me, but the conversation that I had with my mom

this weekend was still fresh and painful in my mind. I’d done what she asked. I’d gone through every

conversation that I ever had with Derek and Ursula and looked for some proof that I wasn’t just the

side chick. And the results were bleak. The more I thought about it, the more I worried that my mom

was right.

And Derek wasn’t exactly doing much to change things either. He’d cancelled our date this

weekend and the few texts that he sent me had me worried. It was almost like he knew I was catching

on and would soon confront him. I tried not to read it that way, but it was hard.

It’s not like I really knew the man. He was a Hollywood star. And what was I? Nothing. A nobody

who could sort of sing that just happened to rescue him from a gaggle of horny bachelorettes that one

time. He probably saw me as an easy conquest who turned into a convenient one. It’s not like I tried

to put up much resistance. I'd pursued him. I'd made it easy for him to keep me secret.

And Ursula? Well she sucked. But if what my dad said was true, then it made perfect sense for her

to hate me. I was, after all, infringing on her territory. I thought back to my first day on set when I'd

danced with Derek and been interrupted by Ursula. She'd told me then that Derek forgot all about me

when I wasn't around. I hated to entertain the thought, but maybe she was right.

"Ugh, there's that smell again," Flo said when I walked on set that morning to join the group.

I rolled my eyes at her. "Give it up," I told her, snapping. "This is the last day of filming. Maybe

lay off a bit?"

"Please. You don't get a vote," she stammered. "You shouldn't even be here."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Of course, I do. The only reason you're still here is because you slept around

enough to make a few friends."

"Uh-huh. Sure. Are you saying that I slept with Mia and that's why I got my solo?"

She laughed. "Probably. Maybe you go both ways."

I rolled my eyes at her. "And maybe you're just a bitch."

Flo didn’t seem to know what to say. She gaped at me. Bullies never seem to know how to

respond when you call them out on their shit in public. It’s much easier to be cruel in private. I should

have done this a long time ago. I started to walk away, feeling if not vindicated, a least a little bit less

stepped on.

“You don’t belong here,” Flo said to my retreating back.

“Well, I’ll be out of your hair this afternoon, won’t I?”

It was Jess who replied. She smirked and shoulder checked me. I stumbled back. “Yeah, maybe

you will be,” she said.

39

DEREK

“I THINK WE SHOULD TAKE A BREAK,” Mia said to the chorus girls. Ariel and her fellow dancers

relaxed gratefully. They’d been holding position for twenty minutes while the lighting guys fiddled

with something just not quite right. I was stuck too, but I was just chilling in center stage with Ursula.

They’d been mid can-can for some time now and it was obvious that they couldn’t stay that way

forever. “We’ll get the lighting fixed and then put you back up there in a minute.”

This whole day had been a low-grade disaster. Ever since we got on set this morning to find the

donuts had somehow gotten smushed by craft services, it had been one irritant after another. We were

almost at the end of filming, but the finale scene we were trying to shoot seemed cursed. First the

sound went out. Then the cameras started going on the fritz. Now the lighting seemed to be rebelling.

It was putting additional pressure on my already fragile and worried state of mind.

Ariel had been wary and cagey all day. She looked pale when she wasn't smiling for the cameras.

She would barely even look at me. Although we'd agreed some time back to keep our distance from

one another on set, I could feel that something was different now. Something was bothering Ariel and

she wouldn't even return my texts so I could ask her about it.

On top of everything else, I still needed to tell her about the tour. It was only a matter of time

before word got to her, and it might have already. I needed to reassure her that not only would I not be

disappearing for three months, I was working to make sure that this fake engagement we were both

suffering through was going to end soon. I knew that Elaine would find a solution. She always did. I

should have probably reached out to her weeks ago, but I really did think I had things under control.

Just as Ariel was passing under the light, something above us creaked, squealed, and then

whistled. I don’t know what came over me, but I knew in that instant that something was about to fall

and hurt Ariel. I moved on instinct.

In a move that would probably make my brother Peter, king of action movies, proud, I dove across

the stage, scooping Ariel up into my arms and pushing us both out of the way of a falling light. I heard

it slam into the ground right as I fell too, carried by inertia right into a conveniently situated fake

plant. Ariel and I went down, tumbling into the plant and escaping with only a few little bumps.

Ariel looked up at me, clearly stunned to be in my arms, in a plant, on the ground. She blinked her

big blue eyes.

“Derek?” she stuttered, putting her palms against my chest and looking shaken. “What happened?”

“The light,” I replied, looking over my shoulder, panting. “The light fell.”

Her gaze followed my pointing finger and her lips parted in disbelief.

“Thank you,” she said softly. Her eyes were staring into mine in a way that made me very much

want to kiss her. I had to resist with every fiber of my being.

“Don’t mention it.”

Adrenaline and attraction fought in my veins.

The set was pin drop quiet. The moment lengthened. Around us, the entire cast and crew were too

stunned to speak, staring at the smoking light where Ariel had been standing just seconds before. Then

all hell broke loose.

“Oh my God!” Mia cried, getting up from her chair and motioning for the crew. “Get the medic!”

A flurry of activity started around us and Ariel pushed her way out of my arms, rising like she was

on fire. She disappeared around a corner, running from the contact with me. Rationally I knew it

probably wasn’t ideal from a PR standpoint to be cuddling with her in a fern, but the sudden lack of

her in my arms was palpable. The look on her face when Ursula came to check on me was painful.

“Are you alright?” Ursula crooned, throwing herself down and into my arms. “That was so brave!

I can’t believe the light just fell like that. What a horrible accident. It’s so wonderful that no one was

hurt.”

In the ensuing chaos, I was hailed as a hero. Nobody knew what happened with the light. But the

way Ursula was standing guiltily off to the side gave me a bad feeling. It wasn't too long before I had

a chance to interrogate her.

"Tell me you had nothing to do with a two-hundred-point light almost crushing my girlfriend," I

muttered in her ear, pretending affection in between takes.

She batted her eyes at me. "Gosh Derek, why would I drop a light on myself?"

I ground my teeth. "Ursula, what did you do?"

"Nothing!" she said. Her expression was annoyed. "Honestly, Derek. Do you have to blame me

for everything that goes wrong in your life? I didn't drop a light on Ariel. I was standing in the shot,

remember? It could have as easily crushed me. Now, if Ariel's made other enemies on this set, that's

her problem. Nobody likes a promiscuous woman. Or a cheater." She shrugged. "If someone got it in

their head that taking Ariel out of circulation for a bit might help the movie, well then they might just

try it, you know? We all want to be successful."

I swallowed hard. Ursula may not have personally had anything to do with the light almost killing

Ariel, but I had a bad feeling she'd been fomenting resentment against Ariel for weeks, and this was

just the culmination of it. Somebody on set, probably a disgruntled, jealous somebody, was out to get

Ariel. Whether it was misplaced loyalty to Ursula or a personal vendetta, Ariel was no longer safe on

this production. Thankfully we only had one more scene to shoot and we'd be done for good.

"Ursula, it's one thing to dislike Ariel," I said, whispering in her ear and wearing a smile the

whole time. "It's one thing to be jealous of her. Or even to hate her. But to let things get so out of hand

that a person might be hurt? That's really pathetic. I can't wait for this to be over."

She blinked at me. "It's not going to be over for at least three and a half more months," she

replied. "Hate me all you want, but you're going to be seeing a whole lot more of me. And no, I had

nothing to do with that light. Jesus. I might not be your favorite person in the world, but I'm not an

attempted murderer either."

"Why don't I trust you?"

"I don't know," Ursula said, shaking her head. "You should. Everything I've done so far is for

both of us. I'm helping you."

"I don't feel helped."

“You will when you win your Oscar. But in the meantime, you’re just going to have to get used to

me.”

I shrugged. “Don’t count on it. You’ve been full of surprises lately, but I’ve got a few of my own

in store for you.” I grinned at her, stepping back and offering her my hand. “So, baby? Wanna’ shoot

this final scene and go home?” I asked, loud enough that everyone around could hear us. “I’ve got a

date planned for us tonight that will knock your socks off.”

Her lips parted in surprise. I hadn’t planned an outing for us yet. But I’d thought of one that she’d

absolutely hate.

“Where?” she stuttered. We were in public, so she couldn’t very well negotiate out of it. She was

going to have to agree, no matter what I said.

“Fishing,” I told her. “We’re going to go deep sea fishing. At night. I haven’t been fishing in ages.

I can’t wait.” I happened to know for a fact that Ursula got horribly seasick. We’d originally planned

for a scene to take place on a boat and it had to be cut out of an early script because of it. If Ursula

wanted me in public, she was going to have to endure four hours on a small, bumpy fishing boat this

evening.

She turned green just thinking about it. “Oh, how lovely,” she stammered.

I smiled happily at her. “It’ll be so romantic,” I told her. “Just you, me, the fish, fifty of our closest

friends, and the gentle rocking of the boat.”

This was phase one of Elaine’s plan—turn Ursula’s fake relationship against her. Take her on the

most obnoxious dates possible. After a couple of these nightmares, she’d be more open to a

negotiated settlement. I could tell by the look on her face that she was already dreading the fishing

expedition. Taking her horseback riding was next (she also had a fear of horses). Then volunteering at

an animal shelter for abandoned reptiles. Her agent had willingly ponied up a list of Ursula’s greatest

fears when Elaine approached her with a long-term plan in mind.

There was a light at the end of the tunnel with Ursula, but it wouldn’t mean much if Ariel wasn’t

standing in it. I desperately needed to figure out what was going on with her. Unfortunately, it would

have to wait until after the final bow on this production. We still had a scene to shoot. Until then, I had

to play my part. Or parts, rather.

I turned my attention back to Ursula. “Let’s get this movie finished so we can go fishing, huh

babe?”

Ursula winced. She clearly didn’t like being called babe. Got it. I was going to call her that, and

nothing but that, from now on. She saw me register both her displeasure and my own enthusiasm to

repeat the nickname. Her eyes narrowed.

“Great,” she said, accepting my hand and getting into position with me centerstage. “You’re lucky

you were too far away from that light for me to push you under it,” she whispered. “I *’m not going*

fishing.”

“Whatever you say, babe.”

She was definitely going fishing. Elaine had arranged it so Meg Butler would be there with the

cameras. I knew that Ursula was powerless to resist a good media spotlight, even though I’m sure she

was going to loathe every single moment of it.

The gloves were off now. I was going to fix this. I was one hundred percent committed. I was

going to drive Ursula to hate me and want nothing to do with me. I was going to figure out how to

move heaven and earth to get out of the damn media tour. And I was going to fix whatever had Ariel

so spooked. I had to. Because otherwise the damn light might as well have crushed me to death.

DEREK

“ARE YOU OKAY?” I asked Ariel when I finally found her alone during an afternoon break. She was

packing up her locker in the dressing room. The scene we had been trying to shoot had, at last, been

shot. We were done except for a few potential reshoots that Lena was still looking over and deciding

on. Most of the cast and crew had already gone out for celebratory drinks.

“I’m fine,” Ariel said, looking at me with an expression I didn’t know how to name but couldn’t

stand seeing on her face. I only saw it for a second before she turned away. “Thank you.”

“I think someone dropped that light on you intentionally.”

Ariel was facing away from me so I couldn’t see or interpret her face. “Probably. Things have

been getting worse and worse around here. I’m glad we’re finished.”

Distantly, I knew that Ariel had been putting up with some intense bullying on set. The chorus

girls, most of them anyway, had fallen under Ursula’s spell. They had all jumped on the ‘hate Ariel’

bandwagon because someone more popular and famous than they were had told them to. It was like

high school but with higher stakes.

“You could have died.”

Ariel turned from her locker to look at me. Had she been crying?

“Derek, why didn’t you tell me about the tour?” she asked. Her voice wavered.

I sighed. She’d found out. I wanted to tell her myself, in person. But the weekend had gotten so out

of control busy, and then I’d spent all of my remaining time fighting things out with Elaine.

“I was going to tell you today,” I admitted. “But you’ve kind of been avoiding me.”

“Three months is a very long time,” she said. Her eyes searched mine for something, but I guess

she didn’t find it because she looked back down at her bag. “It might be long enough for you to fall in

love with Ursula for real.”

“I’m going to get out of this tour,” I promised her. “This is all just going to be for a few more

weeks.”

“It’s okay,” Ariel said. “You can tell me the truth.”

“This is the truth,” I said, coming closer to her to grab her hand. “I’ve been talking to my agent.

We’re going to figure out a way for me to get out of this tour, to get out of this fake engagement, to get

free of Ursula period.”

“Okay.” She didn’t look convinced.

“Ariel, what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

She shook her head. “I’ve just been thinking a lot lately.” She took a deep breath before

continuing. “I heard through the grapevine that Ursula’s been doing everything in her power to have

me blacklisted in Hollywood. She doesn’t want me to work ever again. I think I’m probably going to

need to move home.”

“What do you mean, move home?”

She was home. Hollywood was her home. I was her home. Or at least, I wanted to be. If she’d

have me.

“Home, to Sacramento,” she replied, staring down at her empty locker. “I don’t think I can keep

doing this.”

“We’re going to figure this out,” I told Ariel. “I just need a little more time.”

She nodded. “Okay Derek.”

The fact that she wasn’t even arguing with me made me nervous. Ariel wasn’t usually one to run

from an argument. She said how she felt. Her honesty and genuineness was one of the things I liked

most about her.

“Does that mean you’ll give me a little while longer?” I asked. “You aren’t leaving me, are you?”

She blinked up at me and her eyes were full of unshed tears. I felt helpless. Helpless to fix the

situation. Helpless to reassure Ariel. I could make her all kinds of promises here, where we were

alone. But those promises didn’t mean much when we couldn’t even walk down the street hand in

hand.

“I’m not leaving you,” Ariel said, and her voice broke. “But I’m not sure I really ever had you,

either.”

I froze. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head at me. “Let’s not fight. I don’t have it in me right now, okay? It’s been a long

day and I almost got crushed by a light.”

I swallowed. She had a point. I nodded and looked for anything to say that might change the

subject.

“You didn’t get scratched up, did you?” I asked, showing her the long bruise developing on the

underside of one of my arms. “The plant bit me a little bit.”

Ariel’s eyes went wide, and she reached out to touch the purplish mark. “No. I’m totally fine. I’m

sorry you got hurt though.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Her eyes flashed. “Not directly.”

“Not even indirectly,” I promised her. “For all we know it was a freak accident. At least we’re

both safe now.”

She smiled a thin, ghost of a smile. “I’m glad you’re safe. Do you want to reschedule our movie

date for tonight since you couldn’t go this weekend?”

I winced. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I have to take Ursula deep sea fishing.”

“Oh.” Her face fell.

Shit.

This wasn’t working. I couldn’t continue to see two women at once.

“She hates fishing,” I babbled. “I’ve been talking to my agent, Elaine. She said I should try to sour

the relationship. This is my attempt to do that. I’ll take her fishing and she’ll get horribly seasick.

Then, after that I’ll take her on other dates she won’t like. Eventually spending time with me will

become so unpleasant that she’ll come around to the idea of a mutual breakup.”

Ariel nodded. “Okay.”

I reached out to touch her, pulling her to me and holding her against my chest. She came willingly

enough, wrapping her arms around my neck and sighing against me. For the first time all day, I felt a

little bit better. Just having her in my arms helped.

“Ariel, you know I love you, right?”

She looked up at me. “When you’re here with me, I do.”

“It’s true all the time though, even when I’m not.”

She nodded. “It’s just hard, Derek. When we’re together, I feel like everything is going to be okay.

But when you’re out with her, or I’m running through the things she’s said to me here, or when I’m in

the studio singing with the recording of your voice... it’s like I’m the one who’s living the double life.

I’m the one who’s living the lie. I don’t know how to do this. I’ve barely ever dated anyone before.

I’ve definitely never felt like this for anyone before. But I can’t tell anybody. And it makes me feel

like I’m lying to myself.”

I tipped her chin up to kiss her and she kissed me back hesitantly. “You aren’t lying to yourself.

This is going to be okay. I promise. I just need a little more time to figure things out.”

“Okay. But if we can’t fix this or you go on that tour, I’m moving back to Sacramento,” Ariel said.

“I’m not giving you an ultimatum, it’s just a fact. I’m running out of money. I can keep working at

Sebastian’s for a little while, but it won’t be enough to keep me afloat. I’m broke. And I think it

would kill me to know you were out there touring the country with Ursula and lip-syncing to my voice

in front of audiences. I just think it would kill me.” She hung her head. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry,” I told her. “I will figure out a way to fix this. It’s my fault we ended

up in this situation. You’ve been more than patient already. I should never have asked you to do this,

to keep this secret.”

“You didn’t ask me to,” she said, reaching out to press her hand against my chest as if to steady

herself. “I offered.”

She was right, but it didn’t make me feel better. “One week,” I said. “Give me one week to fix

this. That’s all I ask.”

Ariel nodded. “Okay. I can do that. I hope you know that I’m not angry with you, Derek. I’m just

frustrated by this situation. And the fact that people are maybe trying to hurt me—really, physically

hurt me now—it isn’t helping.”

“It was probably Ursula.”

“How could it have been Ursula?” Ariel asked. “She was in the scene with us.”

I frowned. “I don’t know. But nobody is going to hurt you,” I told her. “Filming is over. Even if it

wasn’t an accident and someone maliciously tried to drop that light on you, it can’t happen again.”

“I’m going to go home now,” Ariel said, turning to close her locker. “I think I’ve had enough of

this day.”

I wanted to go with her. I wanted to tell Ursula to go fuck off and cash in my rain check with

Ariel. But I couldn’t. In order for me to get what I wanted in the long run, I would have to temporarily

make myself even more miserable. That meant going fishing with Ursula, even though I hated fishing

almost as much as she hated boats. I was going to do it though.

There are a lot of good things in life that require delaying gratification. My career had been full of

false starts and reverses. Full of projects that I thought would be fun, or fulfilling, or successful, and

that, for whatever reason, failed to live up to the hype. I was less successful than my brother Tommy

in a lot of ways, although I’d always been chasing the fun, and not the success. And I never gave up

chasing it—the joy that came from doing what I loved was worth the long nights and the tired feet and

the lackluster box office sales. I told myself that if I could just manage to live through the bad parts,

then the good parts would come. I convinced myself. I made myself believe it.

I hoped that Ariel had enough patience in me to put up with this delay in our mutual gratification. I

knew she'd be worth the wait. I could see success and happiness for us hanging just out of reach. If

we could just hold on long enough to grab it, we'd arrive. I knew to the core of my being that once

people saw Ariel on screen, she'd be successful. The roles would start coming in for her, especially

after Ursula stopped undermining her. But we just had to wait a little bit longer.

41

DEREK

"SO, tell us, Derek, when's the wedding?"

I stared at the reporter on the red carpet, confused.

"Uh, we haven't set a date yet," I stuttered. It had been a little over a week since filming ended

and I was attending my brother Peter's film premiere. They were supposed to be asking about his

movie. Not my relationship. Fake relationship. Whatever.

"Where's Ursula? Why isn't she with you tonight?" another reporter asked. I pretended not to hear

her. I fiddled with my cuff links like they'd just become extraordinarily interesting and kept walking.

The questions kept coming from every angle.

"Are you and Ursula excited about the tour?"

"What kind of a wedding does Ursula want?"

"Are you two looking to start a family soon?"

It was enough to cause an instant migraine. At least Meg Butler wasn't here. She couldn't get real

press credentials—too many bridges burned in the past if I understood correctly from Elaine. Stick

your foot in your mouth too many times with celebrities on the red carpet by bringing up something

wildly inappropriate and they stop letting you in. Her absence was the only good thing about this

experience so far tonight.

I accelerated my walk down the red carpet to a near-canter. This was never the plan for this

evening. I just wanted to see the damn movie and support my brother. I hadn't even thought about

bringing Ursula to the premiere. I guess I should have run it by Elaine. It wasn't a huge deal, but

Ursula would definitely bitch at me about not including her tonight. This delicate balancing act of lies

and secrets was hard to maintain. Especially because I knew Ariel was at Sebastian's right now,

working her butt off, and wishing she could be by my side instead. Or maybe that was just want I

wanted. I shook my head to try and dislodge the worry that Ariel was running out of patience as I tried

to fix things.

Inside the theater, I found Peter and the rest of my family getting ready to go inside and watch the

movie. I was late. They saw me approach and turned to greet me. Nothing like a small Prince family

gathering to top off an inquisition on the red carpet. I was usually happy to see my family, but tonight I

was wishing I'd just stayed home. Or better yet, spent time with Ariel. Being away from her made me

crabby and short-tempered.

"There he is," my dad said, putting his arm around me and laughing. "The son that got himself

engaged by accident."

Nice to see you too, dad.

I shrugged off his embrace, irritated and worried. I'd been initially concerned that my dad was

going to take the news about Ursula and the blackmail badly, but he seemed amused. Apparently, I

was such a fuck-up in general compared to my brothers that he wasn't even angry.

“It wasn’t an accident,” I clarified in a low voice. “it was blackmail. We’ve been over this,

remember?”

My dad nodded a genial, happy smile. “Yes, yes,” he said. “I was just kidding. Don’t be so

sensitive. Besides, you’re working on it, right?” he teased.

For whatever reason, my dad had equated theater with sensitivity and weakness. Because I was

the little theater kid of the bunch, I was always accused of being overly sensitive. It had always

bothered me. It still did.

“I am working on it,” I said, keeping my voice low. The last thing we needed was for someone to

overhear this conversation and print it. “Hopefully in a few weeks this will all be over.”

“And then I can meet your real girlfriend,” my dad said, grinning. “The dancer. This is all so

dramatic. It’s just like one of your plays.”

I shrugged. He wasn’t entirely wrong. There was something Shakespearean about the whole thing.

I just wasn’t sure yet whether we were in a comedy or a tragedy. I was hoping the former, but lately it

was looking like it might be the latter.

“So,” Holden asked me when we were going into the theater, “how are things going with the tour?

Have you figured out how to get out of it yet?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I’m still working on it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If you’d told me things were so out of control, I would have done more to

stop it.”

I shrugged. “It’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it starting in a couple of weeks?” he asked me, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, it is,” I confirmed, feeling like the world was crumbling around me. “But I’m working on

it.”

I wasn’t making progress, either. Elaine was busy negotiating with Ursula’s people and with the

studio, but no one wanted to compromise. Everyone thought the potential of the film and the coming

payday was entirely worth me being miserable for a few months. Everyone but me, that is. And Ariel.

“How’s Ariel holding up?” he asked, reading my mind. Or maybe it was just my face. I could feel

myself frowning so deeply that Elaine would probably worry it might impact my long-term

bankability if the wrinkles became permanent.

“She’s alright.” It was a lie. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I could feel Ariel pulling away from me. She was distant lately. I knew she was worried.

And she had good reason to be. Despite my best efforts to sour things with Ursula, she was still

doing her best to hold on to me. I was starting to think that she even really wanted to marry me. The

Prince name did carry a lot of weight in Hollywood, I suppose. But nobody gets married because of

blackmail. There was nothing that could convince me to cross that bridge. I didn’t want EGOTs that

badly. I wasn’t willing to go that far if it meant I might jeopardize anything with Ariel.

There was a choice on the horizon for me. I could feel it coming. Even though I told Elaine that I

wasn’t willing to choose between my career and the woman I loved, it might come down to that. At

least I knew what I would choose if it did.

Ariel all the way.

It wasn’t actually a very hard choice, either. As I saw Ariel becoming more and more unhappy, I

knew that my choice would be a simple one. I’d throw away everything if it meant seeing her smiling

and joyful again. Because watching us both become bitter and suspicious as this awful thing with

Ursula stretched on was impossible.

But Ursula was not going down without a fight. My attempts to take her on the world’s worst dates

weren’t even making an impact. She took a motion sickness pill and powered through the fishing trip.

She rode the horses even though I think she wanted them all turned into glue. I hadn’t managed to

schedule the reptile rescue yet, but I’m sure she’d figure out a way to suffer through that as well. She

seemed totally committed to the fake relationship. If she were half as committed to having a real

relationship with someone as she was to her job pretending with me, she might be engaged for real

right now.

“You two should get out of town for a while,” Peter suggested. “Take a trip.”

I blinked. That wasn’t a bad idea. “Maybe we should.” Ursula and I had a little practice planned

for the tour with a local LA audience scheduled for tomorrow, but after that, I had a break. I could

take Ariel out of the country. We could go somewhere exotic. Somewhere Meg Butler couldn’t

follow.

“Just make sure you don’t go anywhere that Meg Butler can follow you,” Peter said, reading my

mind. “The last thing you need is for everything to explode before you can defuse it.” As the king of

action heroes, Peter was always good for a bomb-related metaphor.

“I’ll do my best.”

As I left, daydreaming about the various vacation spots where I could spend time with Ariel

unmolested, I forgot to pay attention to my current one. I found Meg Butler was waiting for me at my

house.

42

DEREK

I WAS in absolutely no mood, although between the two I’d rather come home to find Meg than Ursula

on my doorstep. I hated Ursula that much. Still…

“You have thirty seconds before I call the cops,” I told her. I didn’t need any more drama in my

evening.

Meg looked unimpressed. “Oooh scary. Newsflash, I’m standing on the sidewalk. It’s public

property.”

“You’re harassing me.”

She shrugged her shoulders and flipped her hair. “That’s fair. But they’ll take ten minutes to

arrive. At least. And I’m buddies with dispatch. I bring them donuts every Tuesday. They’ll make it an

even fifteen if I text them.”

Of course, she was buddies with dispatch. I ground my teeth.

“What do you want?” I snapped.

“Maybe I just dropped by to talk.” Her expression was suddenly tired.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Then talk faster.”

“Fine,” she said. “I came to give you a warning.”

“What are you here to threaten me with now?” I asked, exasperated. I was so done being

blackmailed.

She shook her head. “Nothing like that,” she said. “Really. I come in peace. I’m actually here to

warn you.”

“You’re here to help me?” I asked, incredulous. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Then don’t believe me. But you should hear me out before you call the cops.”

It was then that I noticed Meg didn’t look her usual polished self. Although her car was a piece of

junk, her clothes, hair, and makeup were always perfect. Not today. She had dark circles under her

eyes and her hair was a mess. She was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt.

“What is it?”

“The story about you and Ariel is about to hit the internet. And her pictures. The ones of her in

your pool…”

“You can’t do that!”

“I’m not doing it,” Meg told me. “I have nothing to do with it.” Her voice was frustrated.

“What do you mean?” I asked, too dumbstruck to be properly angry. “We had a deal.”

“I know we did,” Meg said. “I’m sorry. I never wanted this.”

“What are you talking about? This blackmail was your idea.”

She shook her head. “No, it wasn’t. It was Ursula’s idea. She came to me. After you left Estrella,

she came up to me and said that she thought you were headed to meet some other woman. She told me

to follow you. She said there would be a good story in it for me. And then the photos of Ariel in your

pool? That was her too. She hired her own people to tail you. *I don’t have any drones. I don’t even*

have rent money.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Ursula’s the one who’s been behind every bit of blackmail. She’s been pulling the strings,

keeping you in line. And now she’s done.”

I stared at her. This couldn’t be true. “So, you’re innocent? You can’t honestly think that I’d buy

that.”

“Innocent? I’m not innocent. *I’m complicit*.” She actually looked like she felt bad. I didn’t know

what to think. She swallowed hard before continuing. “I’ve been going along with her plan because

my boss told me to. Ursula wanted a bad guy, and I was perfect for the role. But that’s all it was. An

act. I know that’s still not the greatest thing, but believe it or not, I’m not exactly rolling in the dough.

I’m barely keeping myself afloat, and to make it worse, I’m in massive debt to my employer. So, when

he told me to go along with Ursula’s plan, I didn’t have a lot of choice in the matter.”

“Why would she release the story on me?” I asked. “It’ll hurt the movie.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe she’s just tired of you and Ariel?”

I frowned. Or maybe her agent told her that mine was doing her damndest to get me out of this

mess, and it was obvious that I would eventually get myself out from under her thumb. Maybe she

knew she was losing, and she was just *that vindictive*.

“I doubt it.”

“So, do I,” Meg said. “I think she just really hates you.” She blinked. “*She really hates you both*.”

“How do I know you aren’t lying to me?” I asked Meg.

“I know that Ariel is doing Ursula’s singing part in that movie and I haven’t told a soul. If I really

wanted a good story, I’d have released that a long time ago.”

I froze. “What?”

Meg nodded. “Thanks for confirming it.”

“I didn’t!”

“Your face just did.”

Shit. I’m sure it had.

She shrugged. “Don’t worry, Derek. I won’t tell. I’m not a monster.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. I wasn’t sure.

She paused. “No,” she admitted. The moment stretched out into an uncomfortable silence. “But I

like Ariel,” Meg said eventually. “Unlike most of the assholes in Hollywood, she’s got real talent.

I’ve been to that karaoke bar before. Sebastian’s. You probably know that, huh? Anyway, I’ve heard

Ariel sing. She’s incredible. There’s no way it’s a coincidence that Ursula, a woman with no previous

singing experience, could be that good. Especially when Ariel, a woman with no previous acting

experience but a world-class voice, ends up with a silent chorus girl role on the same movie.

Ursula’s using Ariel. It explains why she hates Ariel so much.”

Damn. Meg was smart. Also, now that we weren't on opposite sides, I almost liked her a little

bit. A very little bit.

"Why is Ursula doing this now?"

Meg shook her head. "That I don't know. The story is going to hit the day after tomorrow."

"Can't you stop it?"

"No," Meg said angrily. "Ursula went above my head. She went to my boss. I'm here telling you

this now because I think it's shitty. I mean, the whole thing is shitty, but especially this part. You've

done everything that Ursula wanted. Mostly."

"It doesn't make sense that she'd do this," I told Meg. "It doesn't benefit Ursula. At least to this

point she's been consistent."

"It must benefit her somehow, because she's doing it."

I didn't care what happened to me. I'd be fine. But Ariel? She would not be fine.

I felt like I could punch through a wall. I was so frustrated I couldn't stand it. Ariel's entire life

was going to be upended. She was innocent and now she'd be humiliated and slandered. And for

what? Nothing.

An instant migraine headache came out of nowhere and slammed into my left temple. I wanted to

crawl into the back of my closet and wait it out in total darkness. It hurt less in the dark. But I

couldn’t, because Meg was still talking.

“There’s one other thing,” Meg said. “I’m sorry but some of the photos that Meg has of Ariel…

well they’re…”

I gulped. “Naked?”

I figured.

Meg nodded. “Yeah. I’m really sorry. I swear I didn’t take them.” She genuinely looked horrified.

“I know you probably think I’m a terrible person but releasing pictures of someone’s naked girlfriend

crosses a line for me. I’m not that horrible.”

After years of it being my primary profession, I’ve learned a thing or two about acting. I can tell

when people are lying. Meg wasn’t lying.

I sighed. This was the worst-case scenario.

This was going to crush Ariel. I’d thought I could keep this from her. And now, I’d failed.

“Can you do me one favor?” I asked Meg.

“I told you I can’t stop the story,” Meg said. She shook her head. “Really. I already tried.”

“Not that,” I told her. “Can you find out *why* Ursula’s doing all this?”

Meg nodded. “Way ahead of you. I’m working on it.” She bit her lip. “Maybe if it’s good enough

it’ll be enough to get me out.”

“Out?” I asked.

“*Out of debt*. Out of this life. I’m so tired of this,” she told me. “I hate ruining people’s lives. This

was never supposed to be like this…” she trailed off weakly.

Meg clearly had problems of her own. At the moment I had no patience for them.

“Then maybe we can help each other out,” I told her. “Or at least understand what we’re really up

against. But in the meantime, I’d better get started on damage control.”

Meg nodded. “That’s why I came to warn you. Tell Ariel I’m sorry.”

Ariel. God. This would not be a pleasant conversation, but I needed to tell her. Immediately.

43

DEREK

“WHAT DO you mean the story is releasing the day after tomorrow?” Ariel asked me. I’d sped over to

her apartment after Meg and I finished talking. I was still wearing my tuxedo, and it felt wildly formal

for her tiny, studio apartment.

“I’m sorry.”

Ariel looked up at me, obviously miserable. “Our relationship is going to make you look like a

cheater and me look like a homewrecker the day after tomorrow?” she repeated, holding on to my

hand. She looked one second from bursting into tears.

“Yes.”

My heart was beating at a rate that couldn’t be healthy for anyone. I felt woozy from worry.

“She can’t do this,” Ariel said. “You two had a deal.”

“I don’t think that matters now,” I told her. “We have to prepare.”

The first tears escaped Ariel’s big blue eyes.

Seeing Ariel scared and crying made me want to hurt someone. She was balled up on her bed,

sitting cross-legged with her arms wrapped around herself. She looked tiny, vulnerable, and alone.

And I felt completely powerless to fix it.

“But Meg has been getting all these exclusives,” Ariel sputtered. “You agreed that she would be

the first one to know about any appearances... You did just what she wanted.”

“It’s not Meg. It never was. It’s Ursula. She’s up to something. I don’t know exactly what, but...”

I trailed off. I was a fool. Why did I ever think that she would honor any agreement made with

me? I should have seen through her long ago.

“Ursula?”

“Yes,” I told Ariel. “She’s the one who’s been behind all of this. The whole time. It was never

Meg. It was Ursula.”

Ariel blinked through confused tears. “I don’t understand.”

I sat down, feeling deflated and stretched thin. I knew I needed to tell Ariel the worst part—the

part about her naked pictures hitting the internet—but I couldn’t tell her that without the context. I

explained Ursula’s manipulation of Meg in a few halting, rushed sentences. I saw understanding dawn

on Ariel’s features, but it wasn’t the pleasant kind. She nodded bleakly.

“Well, I wish I could say I was surprised,” she said eventually. “But I guess we both should have

seen this coming… Ursula is tricky. Trickier than I think we realized.”

I hung my head. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Ariel answered. She was still crying. “This is going to be bad, isn’t it?”

I nodded and scooped her into my arms. We were in her apartment, and it was a depressing place

even without the bad news. This was the first time I'd ever been here, and it made me realize just

exactly how close to the poverty line she was living. Although I never doubted her about her money

troubles—LA is a notoriously high cost of living city—seeing her reality was very different than just

hearing about it. She needed to get out of this situation and fast. I saw the rat traps in the kitchen, the

peeling wallpaper, and the leaking faucets and fully understood for the first time how much Ariel

needed things to change. It was no wonder she was thinking about moving back to Sacramento.

"This isn't your fault," I told her, rocking her back and forth and trying to comfort her. This

situation was hard for me, but it was a hundred times harder for Ariel. I think sometimes I let myself

forget that. I needed to stop being so selfish.

Ariel shook her head. She hugged me back, but when she pulled away her expression was

resolute. "This is going to be okay, right?" She took a deep but shaky breath. "I mean, it'll be

unpleasant for a while, but it'll blow over."

I gulped. "Actually, there's something else you need to know."

Ariel's eyes were huge. She must have seen the sinking horror on my face. "What?"

“Ursula’s got pictures of you. From when you went swimming at my house.”

Ariel’s eyes went huge. “She has naked pictures of me?” she whispered.

I nodded.

Ariel’s skin was always fair. At the moment it was almost green. “How? How’d she get them?”

“Drones, apparently. She hired some people to get the pictures. I initially thought it was Meg,

obviously. That’s what Ursula and Meg told me initially, but…”

Ariel blinked. “Wait. You knew?” she asked. “How long did you know she had naked pictures of

me?”

It would do no good to lie to her. “A few weeks.”

Ariel’s mouth dropped open. “Weeks?”

“I thought I could contain all of this,” I said weakly. “I thought you never needed to know.”

Ariel looked away. “Why would I?”

“Ariel?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.” The look on her face made me think that Ariel viewed this as

a betrayal. Which, in hindsight, it was. I’d only been meaning to protect her. “I thought we promised

that even if there were secrets around us, there wouldn’t be any *between* us.”

Frustration and guilt mixed with the desperation I was already feeling, and when I spoke, my

voice sounded angry. “It wasn’t like that. I just didn’t want you to worry.”

“I should have been worried.” Her eyes were wide. “I should have known.”

“What good would it have done for you to worry?” My voice was sharper than I intended, but my

temper was starting to spiral out of control. It was my frustration with myself that had me going, but

she couldn’t know that.

“Maybe I could have done something,” she snapped back. “Now we’ll never know, will we?”

“What?”

Ariel sniffled. “I don’t know, but something!” Her sadness was beginning to turn into something

that looked a lot more like anger. “You should have told me! This is going to destroy my life, and in

case you hadn’t noticed, it wasn’t going so great before.”

Ariel pushed herself off my lap. This was the first time we’d ever argued, and I tried to remind

myself not to lose my temper while she did, but it was hard. This was the nightmare scenario. The

film was about to release. If I came off looking like a two-timing jackass, all the work we’d put in

would be for nothing. *I’d have been engaged to Ursula Jones, for weeks, for nothing*. But that was

nothing compared to what Ariel would have to deal with. She was right. Her life would be wrecked.

We stared at each other, lost in our own worries. The frustration we were both feeling stretched

and simmered. It turned ugly.

“What does this mean?” she said eventually. She was staring at me with wide eyes and I didn’t

know how to stop my frustration from becoming anger at the next nearest person, Ariel.

“I don’t know,” I snapped.

“*I’m so angry at you*,” she said. “You should have told me.”

“I’m sorry!” I said, losing the last of the battle with my self-control. I stood up. “I’m sorry I didn’t

tell you. It would have made no difference, but I’m still sorry. Are you happy?”

“Do I look happy?” Ariel asked scathingly. Her confusion and sadness had melted away and now

she looked as angry as I felt. She was rising to the occasion. If I wanted to get into a stupid fight,

apparently, she was willing. “You think I want some story published that makes me look like the evil

other woman?” she hissed. “Is that something I would want?”

I paused. “No. I-- I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. This situation had gotten wildly out of

control. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you...”

“What other secrets have you kept from me?” Ariel asked. “What else don’t I know?”

“Nothing!”

“How can I ever trust you?” I could see panic on Ariel’s features. She was terrified and lashing

out because I had snapped at her. In my moment of frustration, I’d pushed her too far.

I paused. “What?”

She hissed in her breath. “You don’t want me, do you? I was only ever convenient. It just took me

a really, really, really long time to figure it out. I think you should leave.”

“Wait,” I said, realizing that I’d let this whole situation get out of control. Ariel was scared. She

was pushing me away out of fear. “Ariel, hold on—”

She shook her head at me. Her platinum blonde hair shook back and forth urgently, but her eyes

just looked tired. “I think you should go,” she told me. “My life is about to hit rock bottom. And I’m

so sick of all the lies. Ursula’s lies. Meg’s lies. Mine. Yours. I just can’t do this anymore…”

“I—”

“Please go,” she snapped. She stood up, crossed the room, opened the door, and pointed at the

hallway that would lead me to the alleyway behind Sebastian’s. The hallway that led away from her,

maybe forever. Her tears were dry now, and the resolution on her face made my heart twist. “I think

you should leave.”

44

ARIEL

FOR A FEW MINUTES after Derek left, I felt better. A righteous anger fueled me, but it was like a sugar

high—effervescent and temporary. Eventually I crashed from it. The emptiness that I felt when the

anger burned off pulled me down, down, down. I couldn’t escape the empty, aching feeling that I’d

just made a terrible mistake.

“You did the right thing,” my dad told me when I eventually called him up and spilled my guts to

him. “I know maybe it doesn’t feel like it right now, but you did the right thing.”

I wasn’t crying anymore. The tears had dried up, another casualty of the emptiness that was

gobbling up everything in its path. “I don’t know, dad.”

“This is what I wanted to protect you from,” he said gently. I knew it was true, but it still hurt to

get the ‘I told you so’ message from him. “But it’s probably better that you and Derek go your separate

ways. At least for a while.”

“Yeah…

But even if my dad had been right all along, there was nothing else I could have done. I had to

make the choices I made. I didn’t know what would happen now, but it would probably be horrible.

“You were wrong that he was in love with Ursula,” I said, feeling like that little piece of the story

at least vindicated me a tiny bit. “At least I know his feelings for me were real. That whole thing with

Ursula was just for show, exactly like I told you.”

My dad was quiet for a moment. “Does that make you feel better?”

“Yes!” I felt like this was a really important point. “Yes, this all proves that he wasn’t ever

cheating on her with me. He was never with her. She was using him, and it makes a lot more sense

now how obsessed she was with keeping him. Their relationship was totally fake, just like he said.

That does make me feel better. But not as much as I thought it would.” My momentary triumph melted

away as quickly as it had come. “It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

He chose not to answer that question, probably content that I already knew his reply.

“When this story drops, you’re going to want to be really far away from LA,” my dad told me. I

could hear the tight tone in his voice, and I swallowed hard against the worry that I heard behind it.

He was genuinely scared for me. “You should come home tonight. There are going to be people that

want to talk to you. Lots of them. “

I shook my head at the phone. “I don’t want to come back to Sacramento. I don’t want to be a

lawyer.”

Even now, after everything, I didn’t want to be a lawyer. Maybe I couldn’t be a singer or a dancer,

but that didn’t mean that lawyer was the only other possible career path for me. Maybe I could be a

dance teacher? It sounded horrible, but it was still better than being a lawyer.

“You don’t have to be a lawyer, Ariel.” My dad sounded tired. “I’m starting to see that you aren’t

ever going to want to be a lawyer.”

“Really?”

I don’t think I could remember a single time in my adult life when my dad had wavered on his

commitment to my career path. He’d been holding the line for me to follow in his footsteps since I

was in high school.

“Really,” he said. “I still think you’d be a fantastic lawyer, don’t get me wrong. If it were up to

me, you'd be off to Stanford as soon as humanly possible. But it isn't up to me. It's up to you. But you

do need to come home. Because all hell is about to break loose." He took a deep breath before

continuing. "Ariel, you know I'm right. Derek has security and high walls and lawyers and all kinds

of things to protect him from the blowback of this scandal. This will be tough for him, probably, but

he's got resources. You don't. You're going to be a sitting duck."

"I'll just order delivery until it blows over."

"How much money do you have in your bank account right now?" my dad asked. "I looked. It's

about five hundred dollars. You've already burned through everything you made on the production of

'She Done Him Wrong'."

"You checked my bank account?!" I gasped. "How?"

"I helped you set up that savings account when you were in high school," he reminded me. "I still

have access."

"You shouldn't have spied on me that way."

"I didn't spy. I put five hundred dollars in there," he said. "I didn't want your credit to get messed

up from overdraft fees. You can be mad at me for giving you money if you want to, but it seems a bit

petty.”

I paused. "Thank you." My dad was a pain in the ass. He really was. He was overbearing,

difficult, and he thought he was always right, but he loved me. “Really, thank you.”

“Will you come home?” he asked.

Coupled with the cash I had on hand from my tips at Sebastian’s, I had just enough money to wrap

everything up here and move back to Sacramento.

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling defeated. I’d come so close. Well, not that close really, but I’d tried

hard. I’d tried my best. All I’d ever wanted was to sing and dance professionally. It had been my

dream since I was a little girl. It was sad to think that even my best effort wasn’t enough.

“I’d really like to see you, Ariel. I’ve been so worried about you these past few weeks.”

I sighed. “Give me a couple of days.”

“Can you be home before the story drops, please?” my dad begged. “If you won’t do it for

yourself, at least do it for Sebastian.”

“Sebastian?”

“The press are going to come down on him hard. They’ll be swarming around, looking for you.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that.”

I couldn’t let Sebastian suffer for my bad decisions. It just wasn’t fair.

“That’s understandable,” my dad said. “I know you’ve had a lot on your mind. For what it’s

worth, I’m very proud of you?”

I laughed. “You are?”

“Yes,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “You made a very brave choice. I’m proud

that I raised a daughter who was willing to fight for what she wanted.”

“If I did the right thing, why do I feel so bad?”

“Because this whole mess cost you Derek. I have to say, I’m a bit surprised,” he admitted. “I

wasn’t sure his feelings for you were real. I guess they were. But sometimes that’s not enough. You

can’t rely on him now. The man has a career to protect. He’s better off distancing himself from you

and I’m sure that’s exactly what he’s doing. You’ve learned some really hard lessons about

Hollywood in the last couple of weeks, haven’t you?”

“I guess so.”

“Oh, Ariel, I’m so sorry. I never wanted this to happen. But come home. I’ll be able to help keep

the vultures away until the scandal dies down. Then, maybe, after a while, you and Derek will be able

to patch things up.”

I blinked. “I’m not sure I even want that.”

“You don't?"

I frowned. “I don’t know what I want. I guess what I really wanted was for Derek to fight for me.

To stop all the lies. But I guess you’re right. There’s too much at stake for him. I was a liability from

the beginning. And we both made mistakes.”

“This is how people learn,” my dad said. “They make mistakes. It’s okay. It’s normal to get your

heart broken at this age. Sure, you’re going to have your relationship mistakes be a little more public

than the average person, but you learned.”

He was trying hard to reassure me, but being told that I’d learned a lesson that would benefit me

down the line felt like very cold comfort.

“I think I want to just go to bed now, dad.”

Maybe things would make more sense in the morning. I had to attend a press event with the entire

cast and crew tomorrow. Seeing the movie production come to an ‘official’ end would at least help

me to put a period at the end of this sentence. I needed that closure. And after that, I guessed I’d just

go home. Because my dad was right, I didn’t want to be around when the shit hit the fan.

45

DEREK

IT WAS GOING on two in the morning, and I was going on an unknown number of very strong drinks

when I got a call from Meg. It came in from an unknown number, but somehow, I knew it was her. My

body wanted sleep and my brain wanted oblivion, but my irrepressible curiosity still wanted

answers.

“I figured it out,” she announced the moment I answered. She sounded excited, but I couldn’t

muster any enthusiasm to match. I probably never would again. I’d just lost Ariel. Maybe forever.

“Hello Meg,” I replied drunkenly. “Do you usually call people at this hour?”

“Is it late? I’ve been busy. I didn’t notice.”

I could never tell when Meg was being sarcastic or if she was just always being sarcastic.

“No wonder you don’t have many friends,” I told her. “How’d you get this number anyway?”

“Don’t worry about that,” she replied quickly, probably to prevent me from asking additional

questions. “Worry about the fact that Ursula is working for Dante Malcolm.”

The name rang a bell, but I was drunk. “Who?”

“*Dante Malcolm*,” she hissed. She said it almost like she was afraid to say the name aloud.

“Who is that again?”

Meg made an unintelligible, irritated noise. “Dante Malcolm? Come on, Prince. You have to know

who that is. The Australian media and tabloid baron?”

A picture slowly came into focus. “The weird, ancient, heavy ginger guy with the thick glasses

and all the newspapers?”

“Yeah. Him. All the newspapers, several movie studios, TV channels, cable news… that guy.”

Meg was obviously annoyed that I was slow on the uptake this evening. Morning. Whatever.

I tried to focus on the new information. “He doesn’t like my dad,” I remembered vaguely.

Something about a stock deal back in the nineties? It was fuzzy in my memory. My dad has so many

people who don’t like him.

“He doesn’t like *you*,” Meg corrected. “*He doesn’t like your whole family*. I don’t know if he lost

a billionaire pissing match with your dad back in the day or what, but if you didn’t realize, he’s kind

of a media supervillain. The word is that he likes to keep most of Hollywood on a short leash. He

deals in gossip and secrets. He's sort of like me in that way, but you know, better at it and enjoying it.

And *powerful*. Imagine a big, fat spider in the middle of a big, Hollywood web, pulling the strings in

the background and keeping the rich and influential at his beck and call."

"I'm still not following why any of this matters. I mean it sounds bad, but…"

Meg cut me off. "That's probably because you're drunk."

"That's fair," I admitted, gulping down some water and trying to sober up by force of will. "But

explain it to me anyway."

The world came back into focus a little at a time. It was painful.

She sighed in exasperation. "Fine. I'll break it down in little words for you. Dante Malcolm, nasty

gossip-dealing billionaire extraordinaire, is unsatisfied with his level of control when it comes to the

Prince family. You're too clean, apparently? He doesn't have anything to blackmail you or your

family with, and he views you as a threat to his little empire of secrets and lies. So, he decided to add

you to his, um, collection."

"Through Ursula."

“Correct!” Meg told me. “Ursula was working with Malcolm because, well, he can make her

career with a wave of his creepy fingers. She’s got a powerful incentive to cooperate. The situation

with me was actually engineered at his direction.”

“Why?”

“To bring you down or add you to his asset list,” Meg explained. “Either one was fine. He

initially wanted the first option; hence all the time Ursula was spending with you. She was supposed

to be finding out your deep, dark secrets for him. She obviously failed at that. So, he’s going to settle

for ruining your life. Ruining Ariel’s life is just a bonus, I guess.”

“Disgusting.”

“I agree,” she said. “But still impressive. It was quite the setup. I’m actually a bit flattered that he

knows who I am and viewed me as a potential asset too…”

“I thought you said it was disgusting. And what happened to getting out of the gossip world?” I

asked her.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I’m getting out,” Meg said firmly. “I’m getting *very out*. Permanently

out. Out in orbit. After I drop this little bombshell, I’ll need to be far away from the blast zone.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure,” she snapped. “I found all this out by hacking Ursula’s phone. Incidentally,

it’s also how I figured out your number, if you were wondering.”

“That’s illegal.”

“Oh, very. That’s bad and all, but I’ve got them both on a recording talking about their evil plan,

which is twice as illegal. They’re toast. My debt will be paid in full because this is international

news, even if it was obtained by unconventional methods. Once I leak my recordings, they’ll both be

humiliated.”

I sighed. “But it’ll be too late,” I told her. “The pictures are still scheduled for release.”

“Probably,” Meg told me. “But you might still be able to stop it. Ursula hasn’t delivered the

pictures to Malcolm yet. She was clever, actually. She kept only hard copies, and they have to be

hand delivered. She’s supposed to drop them off to Malcolm’s guy at the studio tomorrow in exchange

for her payment, which is *substantial*.”

My heart thumped against my chest. “Malcolm has a guy at the studio?”

“Malcolm has a guy everywhere.”

“Okay, so I just need to stop her from giving him the photos. That might be possible… maybe.

Who’s the contact?”

“Here’s the best part. You know him.” Meg replied. “Clint.”

“Meg,” I told her. “I know you want to release this and be free of whoever’s pulling your strings,

but please, listen to me. I have an idea…”

46

DEREK

THE NEXT MORNING dawned with what felt like the world’s biggest hangover. I felt achy, sick, and

feverish. Worry, confusion, disappointment, and regret all had a limb and they were about to pull me

into pieces. It was all I could do to brush myself off and drag my sorry, regretful self to the very

important press appearance that had been scheduled for weeks—the official LA launch of the tour.

The event was being held at a local theater—the stage kind, not the movie kind. It was

coincidentally the same theater I’d performed at for a recent production of Shakespeare’s As You

Like It, so I was very familiar with the place. But nothing felt familiar about the experience that was

coming.

This was a kind of soft release of the music from the film and start of our tour. Ursula and I would

be dancing and singing to the recording of two numbers from ‘She Done Him Wrong,’ one of which

was the most romantic from the film. The other included the chorus girls, and since the production

was here in LA, they were all attending as well and would be performing live. They wouldn’t be

joining us on the tour, of course, but since we had literally just wrapped the production, everyone

thought it would be fun to start us off with a bang and have them back us.

Everyone but me, that is. I hated every aspect and every detail of this tour. One of the only things

that had me here at all, however, was the opportunity to talk to Ariel. Consequently, she wasn’t there

when I arrived. But Ursula was.

“There he is!” she cried, coming over to kiss me on the cheek when I passed by her dressing room

looking for Ariel. “Are you excited for our big debut in front of an audience?”

I shrugged and put on a happy face. “Not really. Hey, I’m glad I ran into you. I just wanted you to

know that Meg Butler has given us advance notice that you’re going to release the story about Ariel

and me and have been in Dante Malcolm’s pocket all this time.”

Ursula paled. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She swallowed hard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh really? Because I received some fascinating information to the contrary. And what’s more,

I’ve got proof.”

Her eyes were wild. For whatever reason, seeing Ursula’s panic made me feel worse. I thought I

might feel some, I don’t know, schadenfreude, but I didn’t. I felt crappy. Even though Ursula might

feel *even crappier*, it didn’t make me feel better to see her upset.

Ursula hissed in her breath. Her eyes were wide, and she swallowed hard before answering me.

“You’re lying.”

I frowned. “Okay. Go ahead. Give the pictures to Clint and let my life get ruined. You’ll get to

enjoy it for about five seconds before I release what I have to the press.”

“But—” Ursula stuttered. I waved my hand to cut her off.

But nothing.

“This isn’t a negotiation,” I told Ursula. “Give me the pictures now or go down with Malcolm

Dante. He’s toast either way. You don’t have to be.”

“I can’t,” Ursula told me. Her eyes were wide and panicked. “Even if I wanted to, he’s too

powerful. Crossing him isn’t an option.”

I hid my laughter. “Crossing me isn’t an option either. And didn’t you hear me? He’s going down.

You can join him, or not. I’ll give you my word that if you stop collaborating with him right now and

give me the pictures, you’ll be spared from the media spectacle to follow. I promise.”

She shook her head. “I can’t trust that.” She blinked. “I can’t trust you.”

I shrugged at her. “Fine,” I told her. “Then we’ll all go down together. It’s a pity. It could have

been only Malcolm.”

I shook my head at her. That only left me with one thing, one plan, and it was nasty.

Honesty. It’s what had been lacking all along.

“Do whatever you need to do,” I told Ursula. “And so will I."

47

DEREK

I WAS lucky that I knew the theater. It made doing what I needed to do a lot easier and faster on short

notice. As I was just finishing up cutting some wires, I heard the sound of the chorus girls arriving and

turned to see Ariel and the others getting into position on stage to rehearse briefly before the

performance began. We were going to be getting started in just a few minutes.

Ariel looked at me and then away. She looked good today. I mean, she looked good every day, but

especially today. The platinum blonde was gone. She'd redone her hair red somewhere between the

time I saw her yesterday and now. Because the production was over, the studio couldn't tell her what

color to have her hair and she'd wasted no time. Her natural auburn hair looked much more like her

than the blonde.

I wanted to tell her that I was sorry. But I couldn't. My plan relied, to some extent, on Ariel being

surprised. So, I just nodded at her and walked away. I was shocked when she followed me into an

empty hallway.

"I just wanted to say goodbye," she said. "I'm leaving right after this performance."

"You're going home to Sacramento?"

She nodded. "I have to. I can't stay here anymore. I'm out of money and when the story drops, I'm

going to be public enemy number one."

I swallowed. There was so much I wanted to tell her. An apology, for starters. But I didn't

because Mia, Ursula, and Holden appeared. They all looked worried.

Right on time.

"Holden!" Mia was saying urgently, "there's something wrong with the equipment. We can't play

any of the music. Except for the microphones, everything is broken."

Holden shook his head. I didn't have time to clue him in, but maybe it was better if he didn't

know. He'd never been the greatest actor. This way, his reactions were genuine. "We did a sound

check this morning. You need to check it again."

"I did check it," she said. "Nothing will turn on."

"Nothing?" Holden stammered. "The backups aren't working either?"

"Nothing works!" Mia said. "It was fine when we did the sound check, but now it's not working. I

already had the sound guy come look at it. He says he has no idea what's going on. He says the rats

might have gotten to it. It must have shorted out on the motherboard or something." Her expression

was panicked.

I was, distantly, glad I slipped the sound guy a few hundred bucks. He said he could make up

something that sounded plausible. Rats were plausible.

Holden looked angry. “We don’t have time for this. The house is already full. We start in ten

minutes.”

Clint craned his head around the curtain to see how many people were waiting. “He’s right,” he

reported. “There are a lot of people out there.”

Holden nodded. “Yes, and they’re all press.”

This was the first public look at the music and performances for ‘She Done Him Wrong.’ The

studio had been hyping this day for weeks. They’d put the entire weight of their reputation and

influence behind it. The idea that it might not go well had even Clint pale. After all, he was Edgar’s

hand-picked successor. He needed things to go well if he ever wanted to end up in charge of the

studio and he knew it.

Ursula looked like she wanted to throw up. “We’re going to have to cancel,” she breathed. She

pinched the bridge of her nose like she had a horrible headache. “I’m not feeling well.”

Holden and Clint exchanged a look. “We can’t cancel,” Clint snapped. “It’s essential that this

performance go well.”

Clint probably knew the pictures of Ariel and I would hurt the film somewhat. It must be hard to

be in his position. Not that I cared.

“But we can’t perform if there’s no recording,” Ursula stammered.

“Edgar is out there in the audience,” Clint said. “He’s been waiting for this.”

“But there’s no recording,” Ursula argued. “We can’t perform without it.”

“Why not?” I asked, shrugging my shoulders. “We’ve got everything we need.”

Ursula stared at Ariel and then at me. “What?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Why don’t we just sing live?” I suggested. I turned to our

choreographer. “Mia, you know how to play the piano. You did a ton of the accompaniment during

rehearsals. I’m sure you could play the songs, right?”

Ariel froze. Ursula looked like she wanted to faint. I grinned.

Holden and Mia blinked at me.

“Live?” Clint asked.

I nodded. “Sure. We’ve got mics, right?”

Clint exhaled in relief. “Good idea, Derek. A fully live performance will be even more enjoyable

for the audience.” He paused. “Edgar will love it.”

“We can’t,” Ursula stammered. “*We can’t do it live*.”

Holden shook his head and put a hand on Ursula’s shoulder. “I know you don’t want to perform

live," he told Ursula, "but this is the only way. You're going to have to perform live."

"My contract--" she stammered.

Clint shook his head. "Your contract says that you'll do everything necessary for the film's

success. That clause is going to trump anything else. You're going to have to perform live."

"I can't," she said. "My, um, my throat is sore today." She coughed unconvincingly. "I'm feeling

under the weather."

Clint frowned at her. "Do your best," he said. "The show has to go on."

"No," Ursula said, shaking her head furiously. "My contract says I won't ever have to sing live."

Clint stared at her as if in total disbelief. He was not a man that was used to being told 'no.' "Your

contract says you'll do your job. This is your job. Now get out there and sing."

"Why the reluctance?" I asked Ursula. "Is there some other reason you don't want to sing live?"

Ursula stared at me. She stared at Ariel. And then she folded.

"I can't sing."

Clint shook his head. "Did you not just hear me?"

She looked at him, raising her chin up and swallowing her pride. "I can't sing in general. I didn't

sing my own parts in the film. I was using a voice double. I was using Ariel."

Everybody looked at Ariel. She flushed red-purple.

"Is this true?" Clint asked, looking confused. "We used a double?"

Holden frowned. "*Not knowingly*." He looked at me accusingly, as I obviously knew, but I just

shrugged. I'd been sworn to secrecy.

"You're the one that sang all of Ursula's songs?" Mia asked, looking Ariel up and down

appraisingly.

Ursula flinched. "Yes. But it doesn't change anything. She's been sworn to absolute

confidentiality. The contract is ironclad and nobody needs to know that I wasn't really singing all

along." She turned to Clint. "You just make her sing for me today. We'll just do it the same way she

did during the movie. She can sing out of sight and I can carry a microphone and lip sync. *It'll be just*

like in the movie. Nobody in the audience even needs to know."

Clint stroked his beard. "That could work."

"I'm not doing that," Ariel said incredulously. "*I'm not going to help you tell any more lies.* I

already fulfilled my end of the bargain. My work is done."

Clint frowned. “No, it isn't. You have the same clause in your chorus girl contract that Derek and

Ursula do. You have to do whatever we tell you to do. If we want you to sing for Ursula today, you

have to do it.”

“I’m not your slave.” Ariel scoffed. “*Fuck that.* ”

Clint frowned. “The studio will sue you if you don’t.”

Ariel laughed in his face, something I doubt anyone had done in the past fifty years. “Fine. Sue

me. I don’t have any money. Literally. I. Am. Broke. I don’t see any reason why I should help you.”

She looked at me. “Not any of you.”

“Please, Ariel,” I said, swallowing the last of my conscience and reaching out to grab her hand.

“Please help us. I know this is asking a lot, but I’m sure Clint will agree to compensate you very

fairly for this last performance.”

Clint nodded. “That I can do.”

“You think I want money?” Ariel scoffed. “This experience has taught me that Hollywood is full

of awful people who do awful things. There’s not enough money in the world to make me do this.”

I turned back to Ariel. She was staring at me in confusion and disbelief. “Please Ariel. We’ve all

worked so hard on this movie. I know things didn’t turn out the way we wanted for us. I know you’re

mad at me. And I know that you have every reason to hate me.” I took a deep breath. “But if this

performance doesn’t go well, everything is going to be for nothing. All the work we did, that you did,

will be ruined. A lot of people worked really hard on this movie. You can save it. All you have to do

is sing one song.”

Ariel continued to stare at me. Her expression was torn. “You really want me to do this? To sing

for her again?” Her voice was small.

I nodded. “Yes. Please.”

I saw her heart break. She hung her head. “Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll do it for you.” She turned to Clint.

“But I want to make as much money as Ursula made for this film. I’ll take the money and run.”

Clint nodded. “Fine.”

48

ARIEL

I’D PERFORMED LIVE a lot of times in my life. Ever since I was a little girl dreaming of performing for

the audience at Sebastian’s, I’d known that being on stage was my destiny. When I was singing,

everything was always okay.

Or at least, I'd thought so until today. Ten minutes after the frightening encounter in the hallway, I

was warming up alone in the dressing room.

My reflection in the mirror looked scared. But I wasn't scared, exactly. I mean, I was. But mostly

I was angry.

I couldn't believe that Derek was asking this of me. The idea that he would request that I put my

pride aside, again, for the one millionth time, hurt. I'd been burying my pride for weeks. My pride

could only stand so much.

First, I had to let people believe that it was Ursula's voice that they heard on set. I had to dance to

my own voice duetting with Derek. I had to listen to everyone telling Ursula how incredibly talented

and great she was while knowing the whole time that I was the one doing the real heavy lifting behind

her performance. Her dancing was fine. Her acting was okay. But it was her singing that held people

spellbound. My singing.

Next, I had to turn the other cheek on Derek and Ursula's fake relationship. I put up with the

public displays of affection. I put up with seeing them in the news and on the covers of magazines. I

put up with seeing them on set together. I even put up with keeping my real relationship with Derek on

the down low.

Then things got worse when the rest of the chorus turned against me. I put up with the rumors. The

whispers. The sidelong looks and the little digs against my hair, my makeup, and other more personal

things about my personality and sexual habits. When the bullying escalated, I put up with it. I endured

having my makeup ruined and my things messed with. I put up with someone almost dropping a

freakin' stage light on me.

But this was almost a bridge too far. Being asked to sing for Ursula live, by Derek. It was enough

to make someone crazy.

At least I knew that doing this would do something to change things. I'd be getting paid a lot. I

asked for whatever Ursula was being paid on the performance and that weird, scary Clint guy had

delivered. He'd presented me with a contract addendum that was going to set me up for a very long

time. It almost made the nightmare feel worth it. Oh, who was I kidding? It didn't make it feel worth it

at all.

Because it was Derek that asked me to do this at all, and that's what really hurt.

At the end of the day, after everything was said and done, Derek was the one who wanted me to

go out onstage and cover for Ursula. He really was out for himself. His career. His image. His life.

And because I could never fit into those things, I was disposable. It was what I always feared.

When someone knocked on the door of the dressing room, I didn't reply. I wasn't ready yet. But it

wasn't someone from the crew coming to tell me that it was time. It was Holden, Derek's brother and

our director. We'd never so much as had a conversation before now.

"What do you want?" I asked him, feeling sick.

"I didn't know," he said. "I feel like I should've figured it out a long time ago, but I really didn't

know."

I blinked. "That I was singing for Ursula? How could you have known? Nobody knew."

He shook his head. "No. Not about that. Derek and I have been talking. I didn't know how bad

things had gotten for you on set."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Oh." This was the first real conversation I'd ever had with the director.

He wasn’t rude or cold to the chorus girls, he was just busy. He’d never had any reason to seek me

out before. It felt strange that he was doing so now. “Yeah, well it doesn’t matter now.”

“I heard some of the rumors that were being told about you on set,” Holden said. “I didn’t know

what to think. It sounded so over the top. But I figured it was none of my business. Now I know that

you were basically being tortured by Ursula and her friends and it was all happening right under my

nose. I should have done more. I should have stepped in.”

“Well, Hollywood is cutthroat, right?”

Holden frowned at me. “That’s such a copout for our bad behavior. Hollywood is what we allow

it to be. It’s not this evil thing. It’s a place. It’s just people and how we behave. We make it what we

want it to be. You and Derek happened to fall in love at the wrong time. At an inconvenient time for

the production. The studio thought it would be cute for them to be a real-life couple. I thought it would

be cute too. But we were wrong.”

I blinked at her in surprise. “Are you apologizing to me?”

He nodded. “I guess I am. I’m sorry that you got pulled into all this. I already apologized to

Derek, too. I never should have let this get so out of hand. There were things I could have done, and I

didn’t do them. I knew that there was gossip about you on set. I knew that Derek didn’t really like

Ursula much. And I should have used what I knew to try and help you. But I didn’t.”

“It’s not your fault,” I stammered. I hadn’t realized there were good people in Hollywood. I’d

started to believe that everybody was like Ursula. Or worse.

“It’s not my fault,” Holden agreed. “But if I don’t try to make Hollywood a better, fairer, less

horrible place, then it is my fault when it gets worse and more unfair down the line. You have a lot of

talent. You definitely should have been credited for your performance. I’m glad you’re going to get

paid now, even though it’s overdue.”

“Thank you,” I managed. I didn’t really know what to make of this conversation. I hadn’t even

realized that I was on Holden’s radar.

“He loves you,” Holden added.

I froze. “Derek? I don’t think so.”

The fact that I was now discussing my love life with a major Hollywood director just added the

surreal cherry on top. Holden was the sort of man that people dream about having a meeting with. He

could make or break a person’s career with little more than a word. And he was telling me that he

thought Derek, his brother, was in love with me.

He nodded his head and leveled a serious expression at me. “He does,” he insisted. “It’s obvious.

I’m not sure how I didn’t see it before. But whenever he looks at you, it’s impossible to miss.” He

frowned. “And he hates Ursula, and so she decided to take it out on you. I was so focused on making

the movie that I really missed out on what was going on.”

“He might love me, at least a little bit, but I think he loves his career more,” I said.

Holden was quiet for a long time before answering. “I’m not so sure.”

49

ARIEL

“THANK YOU FOR COMING,” Derek said to the assembled crowd. “On behalf of the studio, cast, and

crew, I want to welcome you to a sneak peek performance of some of the songs from the upcoming

movie musical ‘She Done Him Wrong.”

He was wearing a smart, blue pinstriped suit that looked like it had been custom made for him. It

had, of course. All his suits had been. I’d seen the custom labels on them when I poked around in his

closet.

Derek was never on my level. He'd always been above me. Far, far above me. Not only was he

out of my league physically and financially, but talent-wise too. Out there on the stage in front of a

live audience, he seemed almost electric. It was impossible to look away from him. Even though, at

that moment, there was absolutely nothing that I wanted to do more.

"We've been working on this production for the last several months," Derek was telling the

audience. "It's been a true privilege for each and every person attached to this film. We've put all our

combined talent, perseverance, patience, and love into this movie. Blood, sweat, and tears were shed.

And we're so proud to finally be sharing it with you."

The audience applauded him eagerly. They were spellbound. Derek Prince had that effect on

people. He'd definitely had that effect on me.

I'd been such an idiot to think that he would love me. Maybe he did, a little. Maybe it was like

Ursula said. When I was in the room, I was probably the only thing that he thought about. But when I

left, he forgot all about me. There was a Doctor Who villain like that, if I recalled correctly. An alien

that could only be remembered when you were staring right at them. The Silence, they were called. I

was The Silence of girlfriends. As long as I was in the room, I existed. But once he couldn’t see me

anymore, he forgot that I’d ever existed in the first place.

Ursula had won. Despite everything, she’d totally and completely won. I might have managed to

fix my money issues, and my contract issues, but now that I was standing here knowing that I’d lost

Derek, it felt like I’d only won the battle. Ursula had won the war.

Tomorrow, unless Ursula got wise and did it sooner, the story would break. The world would find

out that Derek Prince, currently Hollywood’s favorite singing and dancing heartthrob, was cheating on

Ursula Jones. Their picture-perfect relationship had been ruined by a homewrecking little redhead

named Ariel Cross who got it in her conniving little head to sleep with Derek. He wouldn’t come out

looking great. But I’d come out looking far worse, even if Clint the spooky studio guy didn’t come at

me like a honey badger. I didn’t trust him.

But none of it mattered. I’d be in Sacramento by this evening. My bags were packed. I did it all

yesterday. The little studio apartment above Sebastian’s was empty and the sign that said ‘room for

rent’ was back up in the window. After tomorrow, the only times I would ever see Derek Prince

would be when I went to the movies. I shook my head against the thought of never seeing Derek again

and tried to focus on what he was saying.

“We’ve had a couple of technical difficulties here on set today,” he told the eager faces of

Hollywood’s press corps. “Nothing we can’t handle, but I want to let you know that just behind that

curtain there,” he gestured behind himself at the curtain, “our choreographer Mia is actually playing

the piano.” It would also be where I’d be singing. “We’re one hundred percent live and authentic for

you today with no backing track and no auto-tune. So be gentle in your reviews!” The audience

laughed.

One hundred percent live and authentic? Please. We might be live, but we couldn’t be less

authentic if we were all computer generated. The fact that I was about to sing live and have Ursula

lip-sync was a deep and painful blow to my pride. I almost hated Derek for it, although he was only

nominally to blame. It was really just bad luck.

“The first number that we’re going to perform for you today comes from the beginning of the film.

I’m not going to give too much of the plot away. That wouldn’t be fun at all because nobody likes

spoilers,” he said, pausing for the audience reaction, “but I can tell you a little bit. We’re at a

nightclub. It’s the year 1933. I’m an undercover FBI agent trying to root out a criminal element. Ursula

Jones is a nightclub singer with a shady past and a complicated present. And we’re just about to fall

in love.”

That was the cue for the chorus girls to come on stage. I was omitted from this number now,

standing on the sidelines and watching them come out with Ursula to sing the song. She was just

dancing in this number, it was Derek doing the singing, but it felt extremely weird to be sitting here

with the microphone.

The number started and Derek started to sing. I fell in love with him all over again, despite my

better judgement. His voice was so beautiful, and watching him dance with Ursula with the whole

chorus in the background singing and dancing to back them up was like something from a very

different, more elegant age of Hollywood.

The number was complicated. It started out as a simple ballad, but then, in the middle of the first

chorus, Ursula and the chorus started to syncopate the rhythm. Soon, the slow, melodic music turned

upbeat. Derek's character, a stoic and otherwise square FBI agent, was swept up in the music.

Conveniently, he also happened to be an excellent tap dancer (this was a musical after all). Soon, the

entire chorus line and Derek and Ursula were performing an entirely different number than the one he

started. It was exciting, lively, and toe-tappingly catchy. Derek could dance just as well as he could

sing. More importantly, he could dance while he sang. He sold the audience that it was love at first

sight for him and Ursula. If people hadn't believed their relationship before, watching him sing to her

and lead her and the chorus through a tap routine was proof enough.

The number ended with a huge duet performed by Derek and Ursula. He swept her up in his arms

and flipped her, spinning her around and then dipping her low in a series of steps that looked more

like swing dancing than tap dancing. Then the music abruptly ended with them holding hands and

staring at each other as if the stars had just aligned to bring them together, and no matter what, they

would figure out a way to make that happen. Even though he was an FBI agent and she was a

gangster’s reluctant girlfriend. Luckily, they had the whole rest of the movie to figure that out.

The audience was stunned. They erupted in rapturous, resounding applause. It was only one

number and they were already on their feet and begging for more. It was just what we all had been

hoping for. Success.

Eventually the audience died down. The chorus left the stage. Derek gave the cue to Mia.

It was time for me to do my part. I walked out behind the curtain to where Mia was waiting. I

nodded at her to start playing.

50

DEREK

THE PIANO ARRANGEMENT of the second song, the show-stopping love ballad from the emotional

climax of the film, was not as impressive as the backing track with the full orchestra would have

been. But the stripped-down, minimalist accompaniment did mean that all attention was on Ursula

when she started to sing. Predictably, when Ariel’s voice rang out through the theater, the audience

was totally stunned.

This was a song of longing and redemption and Ariel’s sweet soprano voice soared through the

verse like it had been written just for her. Ariel was one of those few performers that had no break in

her voice, she could go straight from her midrange up into her head voice without the slightest

resistance or effort. As she lifted up the scale into the chorus, I felt the audience take an audible gasp.

She was phenomenal. Transcendent. They couldn’t even believe their ears and I could tell by the

dumbstruck looks on their faces that they wanted more, more, more.

I knew the feeling. Ever since I’d first laid eyes on Ariel, I’d wanted more. It was only natural

that they should too. The only problem is that the audience wanted it from Ursula and not Ariel. Their

adoration was misplaced.

There wasn’t any dancing in this number. It was too vocally challenging, for one. For two, it

would only distract. This song was so powerful, so emotional, that dancing during it would seem odd.

It was a song that demanded one’s full attention whether you were listening or performing. Ariel

certainly had my full attention at the moment, even though it was Ursula I was staring at.

My part of the song started halfway through, after the first chorus. I sang my verse staring

adoringly at Ursula, hitting my own high notes and trying to impart all my notes with the genuine love

I felt for Ariel. This song came at the point in the story where we both thought that all hope was lost.

But this song wasn't about losing love. It was about finding the will to keep fighting for it. It had

certainly inspired me to do just that.

When my verse ended and Ursula's next verse began, I started inching my way toward the curtain.

I had to hand it to Ursula, she was a world class lip-syncher. She really sold it. If you didn't know the

truth, you'd think she was really performing. She even timed her breaths right. And she was so

focused on selling the act that she didn't even realize that I'd drifted off stage left and given the signal

to the stagehand I'd bribed to send the curtain skyward.

Woops. What a weird accident! Oh well, too late now.

Ariel and Mia looked panicked as they were revealed to the audience. Ariel blinked into the

bright lights and stared.

Ursula was so caught up in her virtuoso performance that she didn't even notice as the audience

gasped. She probably assumed that they were just spellbound by her moving transition from the verse

back into the high note sprinkled chorus. Surely it was just her incredible performance that had them

standing up and taking pictures. Obviously, it was just her stunning talent that had them whispering

behind their hands. It wasn’t until Ariel stopped singing and the piano cut off a few bars later that she

even paused in her act.

Ariel was frozen on the spot. Still wearing her chorus girl outfit and clutching the microphone, she

stared at me, then at Ursula, and then out at the audience. Her face flushed as crimson as her hair.

Ariel looked like she was two seconds from bursting into tears. If only she knew that this was all

about to be so much better. This moment might be awkward and unexpected, but it was going to buy us

both a lifetime of joy if we played it right. And I was determined to play it right.

Ursula, however, didn’t know how to play it at all. Realizing the jig was up, she turned the color

of puce and bolted off the stage in a hurry. As soon as Ursula moved, Ariel did too, but in the

opposite direction—down the front stairs of the stage and through the house to the exit. It was the

fastest way out of the theater.

Crap.

Stop running!

I had not been expecting that.

“Stop that woman!” I yelled at the audience. “Please! Please everyone! Stop her from leaving!”

The audience assisted after a silent, stunned moment, standing to flood the aisles with their

cameras, microphones, and bodies. The house went from quiet to cacophonous in a sudden, startled

instant. What they’d just witnessed was beginning to sink in and they all had opinions about it at once.

“I have an announcement to make,” I said, reaching out to Ariel and gesturing to her to come back

on stage. She shook her head at me urgently. She wanted to run. “Although it looks like we’ve had

some additional technical difficulties with the curtain,” I wasn’t going to advertise that I’d

orchestrated it, of course, “I might as well be the one to introduce this incredible performer here

today. Everybody, please meet and welcome Ariel Cross.”

Ariel was surrounded by people out in the theater aisle. She looked up at me with a mixture of

wonder, fury, embarrassment, and shock on her face. I reached my hand out to her and she shook her

head. Then she looked behind her, reevaluated her options, and reluctantly returned to the stage. Her

way out was blocked. She had nowhere else to go. Up on stage with me, Ariel hung her head.

I smiled though and projected my joy into my voice at seeing Ariel finally be recognized for her

work. “Ariel here is the voice that you’ll be hearing in ‘She Done Him Wrong’,” I told the audience.

“She recorded all of Ursula’s songs for the film as well as dancing solos in the chorus line. She’s

really something, isn’t she?”

The audience clapped excitedly. They were, after all, press. This was a story if there ever was

one, a story delivered live in front of a few hundred cameras.

Ariel stared at me, looking like she either wanted to murder or kiss me. I wasn’t sure which, but it

was a very intense look. I smiled back at her encouragingly.

“*What have you done*?” Ariel whispered to me. Just offstage, Holden and Clint were both staring

at me, stunned. I wasn’t sure if their ultimate reaction would be good or bad, but it was too late now

for them to intervene. They knew this situation was under my control now —I had the mic. There was

nothing that they could do but watch.

I shrugged. “I’ve decided to tell the truth,” I answered in a low voice. “No more secrets. No more

lies.”

“Let’s all hear it for Ariel,” I said, gesturing to her. The audience roared its appreciation back at

us and I could see Ariel start to be won over, just a little bit. They loved her. I knew they would love

her. I'd always known it, because I did too.

"I know you're going to love Ariel. She has done an incredible job on this film and I happen to

have one more revelation for you to take back to your viewers and readers," I told the audience.

"Thankfully, now that we're getting everything out in the open, I want you to hear it from me first—I

love Ariel Cross."

The audience went wild. Ariel's flushed face turned pale and then flushed again. I reached out my

hand and she took it, staring at me like she wasn't sure that any of this was even real. I grasped her

hand tightly and pulled her to me, kissing her for the whole world to see and photograph. I wanted the

whole world to know.

51

ARIEL

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" I stuttered, staring at Derek as the curtain went down in front of us."

My body was still resonating with the sound of the audience applause and the kiss Derek had just

given me for all the world to see. Like a bell, I was ringing with it. Shaking from it. I worried I might

shake myself apart.

They'd liked me. All those people out in the audience had clapped for me. My whole world was

different now than it had been a moment ago. And Derek loved me. He said it in front of everyone.

"Derek," I repeated. "What in God's name have you just done?"

"Me?" he asked innocently.

"Yes, you!" I hissed. "What was that?"

Derek simply shrugged his broad shoulders, smiled, and held my hand in his. "Nothing. It just

looks like we've had a few technical difficulties is all."

I wasn't able to come up with a response. I literally couldn't make words come out of my mouth.

For the first time in perhaps my entire life, I was completely and totally speechless.

Derek had just revealed me to the entire world. *He'd revealed everything*. I felt like a fever had

just broken all around me as the secrets were laid bare. It was freeing. But it was also terrifying.

Surely there would be consequences now. Big ones. But I couldn't think that far ahead. I was

barely even able to process what had just happened. Trying to think into the future felt borderline

impossible.

“Well played,” Clint said, coming out from the wings now that the stage was out of sight. Holden

was with him. “I think you managed that situation in the best way you possibly could.”

“Thank you,” Derek said, smiling and shaking his hand. “I appreciate that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It’s odd that both the sound equipment and the curtain would malfunction

that way.”

“Live performances are always so unpredictable. I trust this will eclipse any other news you

might have become aware of.”

“Any news?” Clint asked.

Derek’s voice dropped an octave. “You know what I mean.”

Clint and Derek stared at each other. Whatever was going on between them was probably well

above my pay grade. But whatever it was, whatever the secret communication said, Derek won. Clint

looked away first. “I do. Well,” he said, “at least all our PR problems are solved as far as this movie

is concerned.”

I blinked. “They are?” I asked. I knew that Clint the studio guy probably didn’t want to talk to me,

I was still far beneath his notice, but he nodded.

Derek nodded too. “Yeah, we should be in the clear now,” he explained. “The pictures that Ursula

had of us are worthless now. They’ll never see the light of day.”

Clint sighed. “Fine.” He took a deep breath and looked at his watch. “I better get going,” he said.

“Try not to create anymore headlines for a bit, would you?”

“I’ll do my best,” Derek said, smiling.

He squeezed my hand. “Ariel, I’m sorry. Although I didn’t like it at the time, I know that you were

right to stop letting these lies and secrets keep building up. I’m sorry for everything.” He looked

down at me seriously. “Ariel, I’m sorry I lost my temper yesterday. I— I love you.”

I kissed him and cut him off. “It’s okay,” I told him. “I lost my temper too. We were both under a

lot of pressure.”

He frowned. “We were, but that hardly justifies it.”

“I think you kind of made up for it today,” I told him, looking around at the stage where my life

had just changed. “I can’t believe this just happened.”

“I’m sorry I had to surprise you like that,” he said, pushing a curl back from my face to look into

my eyes. “I needed to make it look like an accident.”

I blinked up at him. “So, it wasn’t technical difficulties?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It might have been.”

I sidled up to him, reaching my arms around his neck and pulling him closer to me. “But was it?”

He shook his head. “No. I wanted the world to see you. I wanted them to love you as much as I

do. And now they will.”

I took a deep breath. “Things are going to be different now, aren’t they?”

Derek nodded. “Yes, they are. They’re going to be a lot better.” He paused. “You still love me,

right?”

I laughed. “Of course, I still love you. Don’t you remember? I’ve loved you since I was fifteen.”

He grinned at me. “I’m a big fan of yours too.”

EPILOGUE

ARIEL

“DO YOU WANT TO SING?” Derek asked me, nodding toward the little jewel-box of a karaoke stage.

His blue eyes caught the lights from the stage, and I was momentarily transfixed. I’d been slowly

coming to terms with the fact that he was going to keep on striking me speechless and making my heart

pound with just his looks forever. I certainly didn’t mind.

I shrugged my shoulders at him. “Maybe in a little while,” I answered. “I don’t want to take time

away from the paying customers.”

“Nobody ever told you that you can’t pay for your drinks or your songs,” my uncle interjected,

dropping off a refill of our drinks with a wink. “Just that you don’t have to pay.”

I smirked at him. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Besides,” he added, grinning. “You’re singing brings in the patrons. Especially lately.”

I doubted it was my singing so much as Derek’s A-list movie star presence, but I appreciated the

thought. Sebastian’s was legitimately a lot busier these days. Ever since Derek Prince had started

hanging out here more regularly, it was attracting a much more affluent and influential crowd.

Sebastian had even stopped taking the rowdy bachelorette parties that he’d always hated. That change

was one of many.

In the ten weeks since ‘She Done Him Wrong’ released, my entire life had been transformed for

the better. The movie was a huge commercial success. It was even doing well overseas. Some critics

were annoyed that Ursula didn’t do her own singing, but the public didn’t care much about that at all.

It wasn’t apparent that she was lip-syncing, since everyone lip-syncs in movie musicals. The regular

people of the world just loved the story, the dancing, and the music.

It seemed like people were loving me, too. I really hadn't thought they would. But I was receiving

film and musical offers and fan mail all of a sudden. I'd even had to find an agent. Thankfully my dad

had come around and, along with Derek, was helping me to navigate my newfound fame.

Part of me had been terrified that the general public would view me negatively given the method

of my, um, *debut*, but the sudden release of some bombshells about Ursula's covert activities with a

certain foreign media baron and a bizarre conspiracy against the Prince family had turned public

opinion the other way. Ursula was getting her just desserts in the press. She was being painted as

conniving, scheming, lying, and backstabbing, all of which were entirely accurate. She was

Hollywood's biggest villain at the moment, although really that honor should have gone elsewhere, at

least according to Meg Butler. By virtue of his vast fortune and some plausible deniability, Dante

Malcolm had escaped any negative repercussions. But Ursula was in the thick of it.

Ursula's career wasn't going so great these days either. It turns out that even in Hollywood

nobody wants to work with a known blackmailer. The fact that in her taped confession she had all but

admitted to conspiring to drop a stage light on me, she was also facing some legal troubles. I wasn't

losing any sleep over it.

And neither was Meg. As Derek and I sipped our drinks and enjoyed the scenery, none other than

Meg Butler stepped out on stage to sing. We'd sort of become friends with the former paparazzo in

recent weeks. Derek didn't trust her, and I wasn't entirely convinced either, but her help had been

invaluable. She'd been the one to tell Derek that Clint was the go-between and had given us our

opportunity to turn the tides. If it hadn't been for her intervention, our lives could have been very

different at this moment.

So, because of her help, when Meg started singing the loudest, most off-key, tone deaf version of

'Somewhere Over The Rainbow,' I resisted the urge to wince at the sound. It wasn't easy, but I

managed to put a smile on my face and watch politely as Meg absolutely butchered the song.

She fucking destroyed it. I'd heard bad versions of the song before. But I'd never heard anything

this bad. Meg couldn't stay on tone for two notes. It sounded a little bit like she was screaming and

singing at the same time. Truly painful. Derek and I exchanged a look that quickly dissolved into

suppressed laughter.

By the time that Meg was on the “oh why oh why can’t I’s,” the whole karaoke bar was grateful

that the song was over. The bar broke into joyful applause as Meg’s voice faded away. We all exhaled

in relief.

After her performance, Meg came over and sat down at our table.

“Hi Meg,” I said, still surprised to see her. “You didn’t tell us you’d be here tonight.”

She smiled. “Did you like my performance?”

Derek turned his laugh into a cough.

“It was lovely,” I choked out.

Meg laughed uproariously. “It wasn’t mine,” Meg said, grinning. “That song you just listened to

was me lip syncing to Ursula Jones’ original demo tape. The one she gave to just her agent. The one

that convinced them both that Ursula should use a voice double.”

Derek and I exchanged a dumbfounded look.

“Are you serious?” Derek asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “That’s what her singing voice

sounds like?” He laughed. “No wonder she needed to use Ariel’s voice. She isn’t just a bad singer,

she’s a terrible singer. The worst.”

Meg giggled at us. She looked delighted.

“I thought you might like to hear it,” she said after her laughs died down. “Since you two are on an

honesty kick these days.”

“What about you?” I asked Meg. “Aren’t you on an honesty kick?”

She blinked at us and then smiled. Not her usual smile, either. Not the overconfident, sly smile of

a paparazzo. A genuine smile. “I suppose I am. Dropping that gigantic bombshell about Dante

Malcolm was a thrill, but he didn’t even get in trouble. Sure, Ursula got screwed, but it feels a little

bit like there’s no justice in the world.”

“You can say that again,” Derek grumbled. He’d been particularly annoyed that Malcolm faced no

consequences. He was still out there, probably twice as determined to take down the Prince family

now that Derek had escaped his clutches. Derek had put his entire family on high alert. It was only a

matter of time before Malcolm would do something to another member of the Prince family.

Meg shrugged her shoulders. “Anyway, now that I’m out of the gossip game, I’m trying to figure

out what’s next for me.” She paused. “What about you two? What’s next for you?” Derek and I

exchanged another glance. “Oh please,” Meg groused. “I’m not going to leak anything. I’m out,

remember?”

“Broadway,” I said. “But first a vacation.”

“Oh? Where to?”

Derek frowned. “A vacation locale.”

Meg smirked. “Riiiight.” She replied. “Where?”

“Somewhere tropical,” Derek said.

“Hawaii,” I clarified.

I was really looking forward to sandy white beaches and blue skies. Not that we didn’t have those

in LA. But these would be *Hawaiian* sandy white beaches and blue skies.

“Have a great time,” Meg told us. “I’ll let my old contacts know you’re going to Alaska.” She

winked.

IF YOU ENJOYED ‘THE LITTLE BARMAID’, you’re going to love the next book in the Princes of

Hollywood series ‘Let Down Your Hair’. Fall in love with nerdy, plucky Ainsley as she breaks

free from her oppressive, uptight academic world with help from bad boy movie director Holden

Prince.

A pre-order is coming soon or turn the page for an exclusive teaser.

LET DOWN YOUR HAIR

SPECIAL TEASER

‘Let Down Your Hair’ is the fourth book in the Princes of Hollywood series, featuring Ainsley

and Holden. Please excuse any typos. This text has not been edited yet.

Chapter 1: Ainsley

“There’s no way,” the undergrad hissed. “I don’t believe you. Not *her*.”

He probably thought he was being subtle. He was wrong.

I attempted to keep my face impassive and ignore them. If I ignored them, maybe they’d go away

faster. As much as I enjoyed telling people off, we were in a *library*. Libraries are sacred. Plus Mrs.

Butterworth, the librarian might ban me. I’d seen her do it before. I couldn’t risk it.

“No really,” his buddy said. They were standing just a few feet away from the table I was *trying*

to work at. They thought I was completely absorbed in my work. That had been true before they

started talking about me. “That cute girl over there works here. The little blonde with the glasses and

the legs? She’s my freakin’ physics *professor*. Not a TA. The actual professor.”

With the glasses and the legs? Were my legs not *perfectly professional* legs today? I looked down

at my skirt to see. They were *perfectly professional* legs. My skirt wasn't even short. The red and

black plaid pencil skirt hit the bottom of my knee, which happened to be covered by hose. Paired with

my demure white blouse, black sweater, patent leather heels, and prim bun, I was not exactly dressed

to seduce.

But it never seemed to matter. I could be wearing a fat suit with a trash bag burka on top and I'd

still get hit on at this campus. The horny undergrads seemed to have x-ray vision. Or they were just

that horny. In all likelihood, it was probably that.

The first guy scoffed, and I could almost feel the pressure of their stares on my skin. It burned, or

maybe that was my irritation. They were both still looking at me.

"That girl?" the undergrad asked after a moment. "No. That girl is not your professor. You're just

messing with me. She's clearly our age. She's probably the president of Tri Delta and you're trying to

confuse me."

I kept my eyes focused on my laptop. The undergrads probably thought I was listening to music

through my EarPods and unable to hear them, but they'd run out of battery juice about twenty minutes

back. I was stuck listening to them chit-chatting inappropriately about me instead. I was meant to be

working on my research, but now I was subjected to their rivetingly crass conversation.

“I know. I know. But she’s really my physics professor,” my student protested. “I swear to God.”

“*Damn*. How come my physics professor doesn’t look like that?” The other guy grumbled.

“You’ve got all the luck.”

My student laughed ruefully. “Man, you’re lucky you got old, weird Dr. Bertrand. He looks like

Eddie Murphy in the Nutty Professor and he sounds like Elmer Fudd. That’s what professors are

supposed to be like—comically unsexy. You try concentrating on the three-body problem when you

have to stare at her perky ass bouncing back and forth as she goes around the room to check on us. Or

when she bends down to grab the chalk and I’m not supposed to stare at her big round tits? It’s

impossible.”

Eww. Is that what my male students thought of me? They were just thinking about boinking me the

whole time while I was attempting to teach them physics? I wished I could unhear their commentary,

but it just kept coming.

“Yeah, whatever,” the other student replied. “I’d trade Dr. Sexy over there for Dr. Bertrand any

day. Some days I’m not even sure if he’s awake in class. Or even alive. And he’s an impossibly hard

grader. I think he just docks points off for my bad handwriting. I’d rather have a professor that makes

me hard than a hard professor any day of the week.”

There were several things wrong with that statement. One. My name was not *Dr. Sexy*. It wasn’t

Dr. Anything. Not yet, anyway. I was just a professor for now. Two, Dr. Bertrand wasn’t a difficult

grader. He gave everybody with a pulse an A minus. I was much harder. If this guy thought Dr.

Bertrand was hard, he clearly didn’t have two brain cells to rub together, although given his other

statements, that was hardly a surprise.

“I’m not saying I don’t enjoy the show,” my student replied. “And she’s actually a pretty good

instructor.” Aww, gee thanks creepy dude! “But I’d rather be solving the two-body problem with

Professor Smith than the three-body problem if you know what I mean.”

The other guy clearly knew what he meant. He laughed.

“Let me guess, you want her to do the thing where she takes off the glasses and shakes out the bun

all sexy-like while unbuttoning her blouse?”

“Exactly! And then she tells me what a bad, bad boy I’ve been?”

They both *chortled*. A genuine chortle. The sort of guttural, nasty chortle that I associated with

Bevis and Butthead.

Ugh. Disgusting. Concentrating on my research while my students cast me in a fantasy porno was

impossible.

This was supposed to be a freakin’ library. Not the sexual harassment gallery. Apparently today it

was going to be both. This whole day was basically a wash. I shouldn’t even be surprised.

My Friday afternoon class had been a disaster. The students may have been in their seats and

taking notes, but they were elsewhere mentally. I wasn’t sure where they were, but it wasn’t Applied

Physics and Calculus 202. It wasn’t even UCLA. In fact, by the time I was halfway through my

lecture, a number of them seemed to have shuffled right off to dreamland.

At least when I was staring at my lovely calculations and lecturing, I could pretend my students

were paying attention. But when I turned around to see the class, the reality was very different. A

super majority of them were glazed over, staring slack-jawed and glassy-eyed at the whiteboard. A

tiny sliver of them were on the edge of their seats, scribbling furiously and enthralled. The last group

were just fucking around on their phones because their tuition dollars probably grew on the evergreen

mommy-daddy tree. So, an average undergraduate classroom, normally distributed as if on a bell

curve. So much for my incredible lecture.

I decided to make them do group work because the lecture clearly wasn't cutting it. But group

work was a ballsy move for late Friday afternoon.

The students blinked at me tiredly and reluctantly turned to their neighbors. They could do it. I

believed in them. After all, if they didn't practice these problems now, they were going to have a hell

of a time doing their homework later. Or taking the test next Tuesday. I was helping them whether they

liked it or not.

I was not one of those professors who didn't try to teach or just read through lectures like an

automaton. I cared. I wanted my students to learn and I prided myself on actually making an effort.

After all, there were a lot of people in the world who wanted my position at this university. I'd beaten

them for my spot and now I had to deserve it. I had to write the bet dissertation. Be the best teacher.

Be the best, period.

But not one student made it through the problem because the fire alarms went off yet again. We'd

had a rash of that lately, all false alarms. The entire class bolted like the building was engulfed in

flames. It was five p.m. on a Friday. They had lives to get to thirty minutes early. Me? Not so much.

But I did have an emergency. I ran to the bathroom, scrubbed my hands for twenty minutes until they

were raw, came back, erased the white board, and moseyed on over to the library.

I had big plans for the evening. Friday nights meant the library was extra quiet. Dead quiet. Just

how I liked it for pouring through columns of numbers and trying to see the magic of the universe in

the digits.

Except now my usual Friday afternoon routine was ruined because these two bozos were talking

about how much they wanted me to provide them *strict discipline*. When I began an accelerated

doctoral program here, I'd never thought my biggest challenge would be horny undergrads with

teacher domination fantasies.

At least the all-male faculty members in my department were relatively subtle about their sexual

harassment. I could handle the low-grade, sidelong crap from a bunch of doddering old fools. But the

students? They hadn't developed any subtlety yet. They put their grossness on front street.

When I began my doctoral program in applied physics at UCLA, I'd been twenty years old. Now,

and one masters-in-passing later, I was well on my way. I was teaching classes, doing research,

working on my dissertation, and leaving as little time as possible in my life to spend reflecting on

anything else. But as I stared across the deserted stacks and project tables in the library that evening,

a chilling loneliness started to creep in.

That never used to happen. I used to be excited about my path in life. But somehow, as I

approached twenty-five, things were changing. I had doubts I'd never had before. I knew my mom

wanted me to have tenure by twenty-nine, but it hadn't occurred to me until recently that it might not

be what *I wanted*. My constant, familiar dedication was wavering, and I had no idea what it meant.

Was I lonely? I'd never been lonely before. Or at least, I never noticed.

The morons finally wandered off, excited to spend the evening 'slaying some pussy' which

sounded far more threatening than I think they realized. I'd never been 'normal' though, so what did I

know? I completed my undergrad in two years, intent on having he very best grades and living at

home the entire time. I was now approaching twenty-five as a lonely, germophobic, workaholic

virgin. Oh, and I lived with my mother. What a fun combo.

My mom had raised me with one goal in mind. I'd always thought it was my goal too. But what if

it wasn't? Then what?

Chapter 2: Holden

"She's not here," I told Tommy. My voice sounded as despondent as I felt. My brother had

suggested his sprawling UCLA campus for my urgent casting needs, but clearly, he overestimated the

talent pool here. It was more of a talent puddle. "There is officially no woman at this school that can

play Princess Amaranth."

It was time to declare defeat. I'd tried. I really had.

It wasn't every day a major Hollywood director came to a college campus for an open casting

call. The turnout to see me had been sky high. I'd now seen every sorority girl and theater geek the

school had to offer, but it had all been a waste. I was tired, hungry, and annoyed.

Tommy raised an eyebrow at me and then he shrugged. My oldest brother had recently decided to

say ‘fuck it’ to Hollywood and his entire life so far. He walked away from one of the most profoundly

successful leading actor careers that the world had ever seen to go finish up his math degree with his

wife. Oh, and he told the Academy to suck it on live, national TV. Seriously. What a waste.

But if a math degree and a wife is what made him happy then I would be happy for him. Me? I’d

rather win a bunch of Oscars and make a million amazing films. But even though he made choices that

would drive me crazy, I loved him. However, as much as I enjoyed seeing him and his wife Cindy

happy, this day had gotten me no closer to finding the elven princess for my next film. It had been a

complete and total waste of time.

“Maybe the theater department was the wrong place to look,” Tommy told me. “Have you been in

here all day long watching auditions?”

I nodded at him. “Yes, I have.” The Blackbox theater that I’d sent the entire day in was beginning

to feel like a prison. The featureless walls swallowed up all light and hope. I’d watched an endless

parade of cute little coeds come in and read for the part today, but my movie didn’t need a cute little

coed. It needed a damn warrior princess. “And five hundred auditions later, I’m no closer to finding

what I looked for. In fact, I may have lost ground. My brain is entirely fried now."

I was looking for something special. *Someone special.* Princess Amaranth wasn't a major

character in 'The Winter Castle', but she was crucial. My movie just wouldn't work without her.

Although not the lead, Princess Amaranth was the lynch pin. This movie was one I'd been wanting to

make my entire career, but it wasn't going to be easy. This was my 'Lord of the Rings'. It had to be

perfect. *Perfect*.

"What exactly are you looking for again?" Tommy asked.

He would know, if he'd read the classic children's book. But he was Tommy, so he hadn't.

Although nerdy, Tommy was nerdy in a very different way from me. He'd never been into high fantasy

or Sci Fi like me or our brother Derek. He was into… wait for it… math. *Math*! What a total weirdo.

I thought about it for a moment. It wasn't the easiest thing to put into words. Amaranth was a

complicated character.

"Well?" Tommy asked.

"She has to be ethereally beautiful, but also sexy," I explained eventually. "Smart and fierce but

also vulnerable. Young but still somehow ageless. An old soul. And she has to be able to believably

command a battlefield full of soldiers while still being a little, cute elven princess."

"Do you want to cast her or date her Holden?" Tommy teased. "You got all sentimental while

describing your princess."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Yeah, that's me," I joked. "Mr. Sentimental."

Tommy laughed. I was, by far, the most pragmatic and least emotional of my brothers. That was

probably why they all ended up as actors and I went into directing. Sharing my feelings was not

exactly my strong suit. I was often described as being cold, distant, and even unpleasant. But ordering

people around worked great for me, and it turns out I'm pretty good at it, too.

However, just because I didn't typically run around being emotional, didn't mean I lacked

emotions. I just didn't like advertising them in front of strangers (another reason I sucked as an actor).

The idea that I was getting sentimental was ridiculous.

"Still sounds like you've got the hots for the fictional princess."

"Yeah, that's it." I was being sarcastic, but mostly I just didn't want to admit that I'd genuinely

had a massive crush on Princess Amaranth when I first read the book this movie was based on as a

middle schooler. She'd been my dream girl. Maybe she still was, a little bit. It would be just like me

to fall in love with an unattainable fictional character. Despite what my brothers all thought of me, I

was not opposed to relationships in theory. Just in practice.

"Right now, I just want to *find* her," I told him. "I'd settle for that."

"Well, she probably isn't a sorority girl with that laundry list of requirements," Tommy admitted.

"Probably not." I sighed.

"Then let's get out of here," Tommy suggested. "How about we check the library?"

I frowned at him. "Why the hell would I check the library?"

"Do you have a better idea?" He challenged.

"Yeah," I said, standing up and stretching. The crick in my neck felt like it was strangling me.

Nope, it was my tie. I took it off. "I do."

"What?"

"Dinner. And drinks. Several drinks."

"You're so quick to give up. Come on. The walk will do you good and it's on the way."

He wasn't wrong. All six-foot-two inches of my body felt sore from being smushed into the little

theater seat all day. Walking sounded pretty good.

“Okay fine,” I told him, figuring the library couldn’t possibly be any worse than the Blackbox

theater. “Let’s try the library. But if we don’t find Princess Amaranth in there, we’re going to dinner

and the first round is on you.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

On a Friday night, the UCLA library wasn’t exactly the most happening place on campus. In fact, it

was nearly deserted. We wandered through the silent stacks, not bothering to be quiet. If there was a

shushing librarian on duty tonight, she must be on another floor. She was probably asleep.

“Why this film?” Tommy asked as we walked. “Why this story? You’re successful enough now

that you could pick anything.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “You should read it.”

“I’ve got homework,” he reminded me. “No time for novels about princesses and knights.

Certainly, no time for dragons. How about you just tell me.”

I rolled my eyes. “This isn’t a book you describe to someone. It won’t be as good.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a master storyteller?” he challenged. “Tell me a story.”

Hmm. Okay. That was a good point. But the book was six hundred pages long, and that was only

the first one in the trilogy. It would take all night to walk him through the details.

“It’s a fantasy epic,” I told him. “It’s complicated. There’s a lot of plot. But there are two empires

at war with each other, a battle mage trying to find his way in the world, a princess in exile, and a lot

of fighting and political intrigue. There are also dragons, unicorns, elves, dwarves...”

Tommy had tuned me out. “And we’re looking for that princess now, right?” he interrupted. The

details had gotten to be too much for him already. Tommy wasn’t actually dumb, not by any measure,

but his interests tended to be more concrete.

“Yep,” I replied. “Much like the hero of my story, I’m looking for the lost princess.”

“What does she look like in your mind?”

I frowned. “I don’t necessarily have a description in mind. I feel like her looks aren’t that

important. In the book she’s got long blonde hair, green eyes, and fair skin with freckles. Tall, but not

super tall. Sweet and innocent, but she also looks like she could bite your head off clean of your

shoulders like a praying mantis if you pissed her off.”

“Well, I hate to be wrong but don’t think she’s here,” Tommy said, looking around. “I guess we

should go to dinner.”

I didn’t answer. I was staring.

“Holden?” Tommy asked. He came to stand next to me to see what I was looking at. I was too

frozen to reply.

There she was. Sitting alone at a table, staring into a laptop and looking annoyed at the screen,

was my Princess Amaranth. Long blonde hair, green eyes, and fair skin with freckles. She was

gnawing on the end of a pen. Tommy saw my expression and laughed.

Chapter 3: Ainsley

“Excuse me,” a man’s voice said, snapping me out of my physics concentration zone. “Can I sit

here?”

I didn’t even look up to see who was talking to me. I wanted no more boys in my life today. Or, by

judging by this one’s velvety deep voice, *men*. No more men, either. I’d had enough men today and I

was fresh out of patience for them.

I’d been in the zone for about three hours now. The physics flow state. It wasn’t always easy to

get on a roll like this. I knew if I allowed myself to get distracted, I'd be hard pressed to find this

productive, zen-like flow again. I still had several hours of work to do tonight and getting distracted

by some dude would put that at risk.

I spit out the end of my pen to reply. I shouldn't have been teething on it. It had germs. "There are

a million empty tables in here and you want to sit at mine?" I snapped, trying to keep my focus. If I

moved my eyes from where they were on the spreadsheet, it would be hard to find it again. "No thank

you. This table is taken."

His voice was tinged with humor. "You won't share?"

"I'm an only child." I'd never really learned to share, but that wasn't why. It was because I was

too busy. I'd never had many friends. My mom pushed me through grade school and high school in

eight years instead of the usual twelve. It hadn't left time for things like friends, sharing, or normalcy.

"So, you like to be alone."

"My, my you're very perceptive," I replied, still staring at my laptop. I was already feeling my

flow state slipping away. "I'm clearly working on something here. While I'm sure you're a perfectly

nice guy, I'm really not interested in having company."

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say yet,” he said. He had a nice voice. Deep and tinged

with humor.

“I don’t care.” Sexy voice or not, I had no time for guys. I’d been morose earlier. I needed to

focus. Getting all distracted by men was probably the worst thing I could do for myself. My mom had

gotten distracted by a guy when she was about my age and it had pushed her doctoral degree back

fifteen years when she got knocked up. I didn’t need that nonsense in my life.

“Is your homework really that pressing? Surely, you’ve got until at least Monday, don’t you?” His

voice was like velvet. It almost tempted me.

“*I’m not doing homework,*” I told him. “I’m a professor, not a student. And I’m really not in the

mood to be hit on by strangers in the library tonight. I don’t want to go on a date.”

“You think I’m hitting on you?” he asked. He sounded amused.

“I’m guessing it’s not my prime table selection that has attracted you over here.” My sarcasm

game was strong. Usually it was more than enough to run men off.

“It is a perfectly nice a table,” he admitted. “It looks good for studying. Quiet. Private.”

“There are dozens just like it,” I reminded him. “Go find one of your own, please.”

Take the hint, I thought at him furiously. *It’s not even a subtle hint. It’s barely a hint. More like a*

billboard of romantic unavailability. Considering that I’d been staring exclusively at my laptop this

entire time, you’d have thought he could read between the lines.

“I don’t want to study,” the stranger said to me. I could hear a smile in his voice. “Studying isn’t

really my thing. I’d like to talk to you though.”

He didn’t take the hint.

I rolled my eyes at the laptop. “*See, you are hitting on me*.” The last thing I needed was to get

into an altercation with the guy, but he didn’t seem to be listening to me. “Look. I’ve had a rough day.

Please just leave me alone. I’m in no mood to be hit on by weird guys tonight.”

“Actually,” he replied, “I’m not hitting on you at all. Nothing could be further from the truth. I do

want to talk to you though.”

“You want to talk to me about physics?” I asked. That was the only other possible explanation for

his persistence. Maybe he was a hapless grad student who needed help. I was even less interested in

him now.

“Physics? God no. Gross.” His dismissive tone made me recoil.

“*Gross*? Okay, you should go now,” I told him. I put my head down and tried to refocus on my

laptop.

“I’d really like to cast you in a movie,” he said in a rush. “Please, let’s talk.”

I looked up at him. The guy in front of me was clearly not a student. He also wasn’t a faculty

member. I definitely would have remembered him, and I’d never met a college professor that looked

anything like him. I’d never met anyone that looked like him.

Tall, with dark hair, light eyes, and the sort of classic good looks that made my heart do frantic,

unfamiliar little thumps in my chest, the man in front of me was definitely not a college kid. He was in

his early thirties, if I had to guess. He was also wearing a smart, tailored suit instead of the uniform of

the undergraduate male-- unwashed, wrinkled, overly casual. I didn’t know what to say.

Sexy. He was sexy. I didn’t know how else to describe him to myself. The hormonally motivated

part of my brain was going off like a slot machine that just hit the jackpot, but the rational part was

much more practiced. It overrode the instinct to bat my eyes, bite my lip, or push my cleavage up.

Besides, I wouldn’t know what to do after that.

“You’re not a student here,” I stammered instead.

“I’m definitely not a student here,” he agreed, sitting down across the table from me. “I’m Holden

Prince.”

He held out his hand I shook it in a daze. He had very nice hands. Strong. Big. Long fingers. In a

dizzy rush, I imagined them on me and had to pull myself back to reality with a concerted mental

effort. I wanted this stranger to touch me? What was happening?

“Hello Holden Prince,” I managed. He was so damn good looking, and his expression said he

knew it. Meanwhile, I was over here forgetting how to talk. “I’m Ainsley.”

Holden Prince. The name was almost familiar. But it didn’t ring a bell.

Was I supposed to know who that was? I wracked my brain.

“I’m a director,” he said, staring at me expectantly.

“Okay.” Holden Prince, director. Director of… movies? I didn’t really watch movies. A little

Netflix now and then. But usually documentaries, not regular movies.

“In Hollywood.” He clearly thought I should know who he was. He was in for a massive

disappointment. I didn’t keep up with movies, or actors, or anything like that. I could rattle off a

number of the world’s leading physicists though. He wasn’t on that list.

“Great,” I told him, blinking and starting to recover my wits. “I’ve never heard of you. I’m not a

big movie watcher. And Hollywood gossip stuff doesn’t really interest me.”

He frowned at me. I don’t think he was expecting this reaction. Perhaps he was used to women

fawning all over him. Given his good looks, that would only make sense. I felt a little tiny thrill that I

wasn’t what he expected me to be either. I didn’t fawn. Too much pride. I sat up straighter.

“I’m here on campus trying to cast a role for my next movie,” he told me. “I think you’d be perfect

for a role. I want you to screen test for it.”

I frowned. “You’re funny.” He was messing with me. This sexy, Hollywood guy had come in here

just to mess with me? That seemed kind of mean.

“I’m serious,” he said. “I think I want you to be in a movie. My movie.”

“Me?” I questioned dubiously.

“Yes. You.”

I laughed in his face.

He was seriously barking up the wrong tree. Except for the bare minimum required during my high

school years, the performing arts had never been on my radar. My mom maintained that

extracurriculars were for people whose curriculars were subpar. You only needed to be well rounded

if you weren't exceptional in the first place.

"It's not a joke," he told me. A little line appeared between his very beautiful, dark blue eyes. "I

mean it."

I shook my head at him. "It has to be a joke. If you're really here to cast somebody in a movie,

shouldn't you be, like, watching to people audition? The theater department is not located inside the

library."

"I'm aware," he said. He made a long-suffering face. "I tried the traditional approach. I did the

cattle call audition. For the last seven hours I've listened to every wannabe actress at UCLA read

lines. It's been terrible."

"So, you thought you'd just come bother random people in the library instead?" I asked. "That's

not weird."

He spread his hands wide. His eyes were very blue. "No. Not random people. One exceptional

person. You."

My mouth dropped open. He was so direct. And he was staring at me like I was something out of

his dreams. He was definitely something out of one of mine.

But he was nuts. He was actually crazy. As sexy as he was, he was just as clearly nuts.

“You… shouldn’t be here,” I said, realizing that maybe the guy in front of me was actually merely

unhinged. Maybe he’d just wandered in off the street. Maybe he wasn’t a Hollywood director at all.

Just another crazy dude. “I think you need to go away now.”

“What can I do to convince you to screen test Ainsley?” he asked. He was staring at me so intently

I wondered if I was blushing. But I was crazy to believe him.

“Nothing,” I told him, shaking my head. “Even if you are a film director—and that’s a huge ‘if’

because I’ve certainly never heard of you—there are people out there who would be better choices.

They’re called act ors. I’m not an actor. I’m a physics doctoral candidate. If you needed someone to

help you with some celestial body calculations, I could perhaps assist. Need some assistance with an

electromagnetism problem? Again, me. But acting? That’s not me. Not my department. Go talk to Dr.

Edelson in the drama department. He’s a great guy. He’ll help you find someone right for the part.”

“Patrick Edelson was the one who supplied me with the endless supply of sorority girls. None of

them were right for the part." He rolled his eyes.

Okay, he knew Dr. Edelson's first name. Maybe he was telling the truth. Still…

"Eventually you'll get lucky and find one you like," I told him.

He shook his head at me. "I won't. Princess Amaranth can't be played by a UCLA sorority girl."

I paused. "Princess Amaranth... from The Winter Castle books?"

"You know them?" He asked, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"I read them when I was a kid," I admitted. I nibbled on my bottom lip. "I loved those silly books

so much when I was a seventh grader." I hadn't meant to be drawn into conversation, but it was hard

to resist talking about my favorite books.

Holden grinned. "So, what do you say?"

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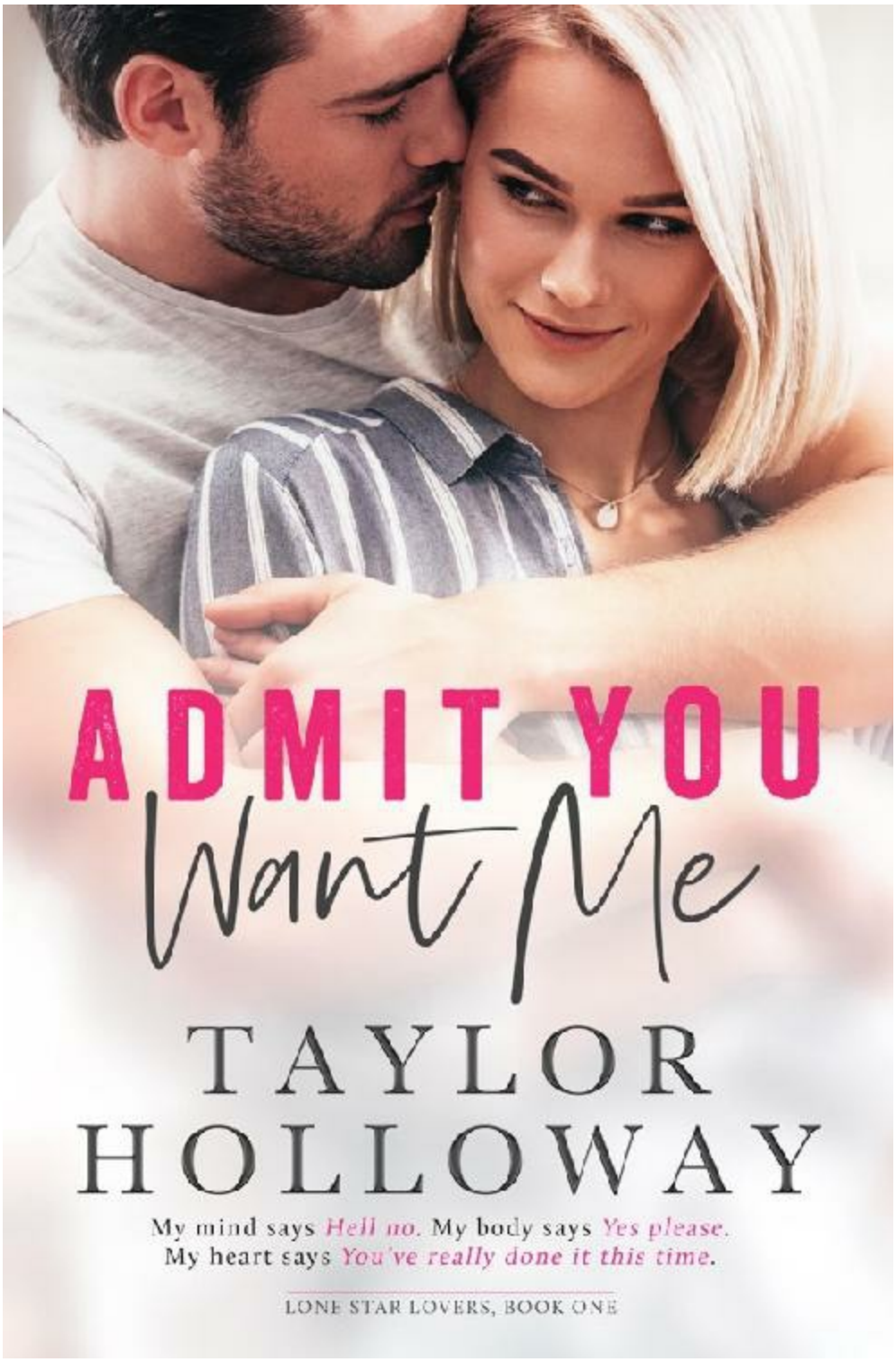
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SPECIAL TEASER

Prologue: Emma

“Come on, Emma!” Kate cried, banging on my bedroom door for the fifth or sixth time. “You can’t

hide in there forever. I’m sure you look fine. People are going to be here soon.”

I glanced at the clock. She was right. It was almost go time. I slid into my green, marabou trimmed

boudoir slippers and straightened my sheer tights. I had a bad feeling that I looked more than a little

bit like a stripper.

“Just a second,” I yelled. “I’m almost ready.”

I frowned at my reflection in the mirror, poked at my fake eyelashes, and adjusted the mesh and

wire wings strapped to my back. The wings were already annoying me, but not as much as the length

of my dress.

My Tinkerbell costume was much sexier and more revealing than I’d thought it would be when I

bought it online. My boobs were threatening to spill out of the bright green satin bustier, and the

nearly transparent matching skirt just barely made it halfway down my thighs. This is what I got for

trusting the photographs on eBay. It would just have to do. The only other option at this point was

cutting a couple of eye holes in a sheet and going to our Halloween party as a ghost.

“Wow,” Kate stammered when I opened the door a second later. “You look *amazing*!”

I smiled nervously. “It’s not too slutty?”

Kate shook her head. “It’s the exactly right amount of slutty. The fact that it’s your real hair up

there in that silly bun is what makes it.”

Kate was blonde for Halloween too, but her flowing, gold Rapunzel hair was a wig. Our

Halloween party was Disney themed and our apartment looked a bit like a five-year-old’s birthday

party (but with way more booze). I grabbed myself a cup of the pink punch and tried to work myself

up for being social.

My current pair of wings notwithstanding, I was not a natural social butterfly like Kate. If it

wasn’t for her, I probably wouldn’t have any friends. Moving in with Kate at the beginning of my

sophomore year was the best decision I could have made for my social life, even if it meant living

inside a kegger one night a week. This Halloween party promised to be no exception.

Costumed people began to trickle into our apartment, armed with beer, smiles, and excitement. I

struggled to fit in. After the disaster that was my freshman year at a school back east, coming to the

University of Texas had been a case of serious culture shock. They don’t call it a party school for

nothing, and I’m a natural introvert and a bit of a nerd. Before coming here, I’d never had a drop to

drink.

Unluckily for my liver, I was also a quick study. I’d determined that I hated most beer, most wine,

and anything with a harsh liquor taste, but I loved anything sweet and fruity. Thankfully, Austin had a

number of local breweries that specialized in ciders, shandies, and even sour beers.

“Are fairies supposed to be drinking, Tinkerbell?” someone asked me when I went to grab

another apple cider from the fridge. I spun around and straightened, surprised.

Kate’s brother, Ward, was leaning against the door. I hadn’t realized that he’d followed me. I

straightened abruptly, hoping my ass hadn’t been totally exposed by my tiny skirt when I bent over.

My breathing sped up and I felt myself biting down on my bottom lip nervously. The hand not

clutching a bottle sent fingertips to my hemline and found that my skirt had ridden up a bit. Yeah, he’d

definitely just seen my ass. His cocked eyebrow and even cockier smile told me that he had

appreciated it, too. I felt a hot flush burn my cheeks.

It didn’t help that he seemed to know exactly what he did to me every time he came around,

although this was only the third time I’d met him since Kate and I moved in together in August. I

couldn’t hide my attraction to him at all. He teased me mercilessly at every opportunity, and it felt

like he did it just to see me blush. He clearly found how bookish, quiet, and prone to embarrassment I

was simply hilarious.

I wasn’t shy for his entertainment. I *wished* I could be different. But I would never be an extrovert

like Ward, or his sister. Even dressed up like Tinkerbell and pumped full of alcohol, I was still just

doomed to be a wallflower.

Ward and I stared across the kitchen at each other. Usually, I turned into a stammering mess

whenever he was around. Thanks to the magic of alcohol, that wouldn’t be happening tonight.

I flicked my gaze up and down his figure and then did my best to tear my eyes away again. It was

all I could do not to sigh dreamily. Broad shoulders and an obviously muscled chest narrowed to a

slim waist and long legs. Powerful, sinuous arms ended in large, strong-looking hands. But it was his

classically handsome face, with fair skin, dark blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and dark curly hair, that

made my heart pound against my ribs.

“Who are you, the morality police?” I smiled at him confidently and floated across the kitchen

floor toward him. I was buzzed and feeling good. Brave. For once I was brave. “I might be underage,

but at least I follow directions. You’re not even wearing a costume.” I leveled a finger at his chest

and pushed him back an inch. He laughed lightly.

Ward was dressed up as a football player, which was not a costume, because he *was* a football

player for the Texas Longhorns. He’d actually graduated last May, but was in town for Kate’s

birthday, which was two days after Halloween.

“Sure, I am,” he replied, grabbing my hand and tracing the logo with my finger. “This is the wrong

team.”

I thought that red color looked unusual. I shrugged and smiled up at him. “You can’t expect me to

know that. I don’t have much interest in sports.” We were still almost holding hands. His enveloped

mine completely. I liked the feeling.

“Hmm. What do you have an interest in, Tinkerbell?” His voice was soft, and there was

something hot and heavy in his gaze.

“Emma,” I corrected automatically, still not pulling my hand away. I didn’t want him to get in the

habit of calling me Tinkerbell.

Ward laughed at my answer. “Oh, so you’re self-obsessed?” He shrugged. “At least you’re honest.

Most girls really try to hide that, at least at first.”

I giggled at him and my tone turned teasing. “*Don’t call me Tinkerbell*. And I have lots of

interests. But what about you? Do you have any outside of football or is it all just visions of sweaty

men with balls in your head?”

He smirked and set the beer he was holding in his left hand down on the counter with a decisive

clink. His response was slow and suggestive. “Well now, I just have all sorts of interests beyond

that.” His native, Texas drawl gave the words a few extra syllables we didn’t have in Connecticut. I

smiled shyly up at him and listened as he continued. “For one, I’m finding myself very interested in

you, Emma.”

My lips parted in surprise. Ward was *interested* in me? As in, *romantically* interested? Interested

in sexy-fun-times with me? The fact that we were standing alone, basically holding hands in the

darkened kitchen, suddenly percolated through my alcohol-soaked brain. He seemed to realize it too

and straightened. He blinked like he'd just been awoken from a trance, releasing my hand, which I

pressed to his chest. I could hardly believe I was touching him. I stared at the hand like it belonged to

someone else, and then looked up at him.

The look in his eyes suggested that he was thinking us through, just like me. He was Kate's

brother, no longer a student, and definitely not going to stick around. I was on the rebound from the

world's worst relationship, painfully shy, semi-drunk, and essentially wearing lingerie in public.

We'd spent almost all of our time at this party until this point trading pointed jabs. But now I had a

very different sort of exchange in mind.

Before I could overthink anything, I leaned up and up—he was much taller than my five-two—and

kissed him. He wrapped his arms around my waist, crushing my stupid wings and then mumbling an

apology against my lips. I could hear his heart beating hard as he pressed me closer into his chest, and

he teased my tongue mercilessly with his until I was breathless. A dull, throbbing ache was starting in

my core, and any silly things like consequences receded in importance. I only needed to fix that needy

ache. The sound of someone laughing in the room beyond pulled us back to the moment. We needed to

get out of this kitchen.

“Come on,” I told him, pulling him towards the hall. “My room is this way.”

He hesitated. “Emma, in three days I have to go back to—” he started to say. I shook my head and

cut him off with another kiss.

“I know,” I told him when I pulled away. I leaned up to play with the soft tendrils of dark hair that

curved around his ear, and then leaned up to whisper, “I’m not asking you to go steady.” He shivered

and squeezed my waist.

“Are you sure?” he asked again. Distantly, I admired his willingness to be honest about what he

was offering me and to obtain my consent. He wasn’t offering love, or friendship, or even

companionship. Just… right now. Just tonight. Impulsively, I decided it could be enough.

In that moment, I didn’t care that this would be very, very temporary. I was taking a risk and part

of me knew I’d pay for it later, but at that second… I wanted to be the sort of girl who did fun and

spontaneous things. I wanted to be brave. I wanted to be the girl who could recover from the last

asshole I'd been with and come out swinging. I'd never done anything remotely like this before, but I

found myself more excited than scared. Maybe I was channeling my inner, plucky Tinkerbell. Or

maybe I was just dumb, drunk, and horny.

Whatever the reason was, my desire was simple. My answer was simple too.

"I know when to admit what I want, Ward. Do you?"

He smiled a slow, crooked smile, and then followed me back to my room.

Chapter 1: Emma

Three years later…

I'd gone to twelve years of primary and secondary school. Four more years of undergraduate

university. One year of graduate school. Almost two solid decades of formal education and what was

I doing on a sunny afternoon in September? Mopping the filthy floor of a bar. All because my landlord

wouldn't let me pay my rent in poems and essays. Such was the life of a starving artist and student.

My new boss and old friend, Kate, was easing me into my first day at the Lone Star Lounge with a

little light manual labor. We'd been roommates a few years ago when we were both undergrads and

had been friends ever since. I was lucky she could hook me up with this waitressing gig when I really

needed it, even if it wasn’t exactly my dream job.

Coming back from my extended study abroad in the UK to find my grad school advisor on

maternity leave had meant a sudden lack of stipend for me. I was planning on working as a teaching

assistant this semester and had to scramble to find something last minute to make ends meet. I may

have been a bit over-educated for bar work, but I could still mop and scrub with the best of them. I’ve

secretly always found cleaning to be very satisfying.

“The early afternoons are usually super dead during the school year,” Kate told me from her

position behind the register. She wasn’t kidding. There were only a few patrons, all nursing drinks or

happily ensconced in their laptops. “I’m going to go work on some stuff in the office for a few

minutes. Will you be okay by yourself for a while?”

I resisted the urge to be sarcastic or snippy and put a pleasant smile on my face. “Sure. I got this.”

It wasn’t Kate’s fault that I was sulking and irritable. She was a great friend. She’d also been a

great teacher so far, instructing me in the little particulars of serving patrons and tending bar here. No.

It was something else that had me all worked up. With Kate in the other room, and Willie—the other

employee—distracted by his newspaper, I couldn’t resist the masochistic impulse to tune the TV

behind the bar into the source of my foul, irrational mood.

I was probably one of only a handful of people in the world that knew that CSPAN was playing

the award ceremony for the United States Poet Laureate today. It’s also probable that I was one of

only a handful of people who cared. But there I was, caring so deeply about who would be selected

as this year’s national poet that my blood pressure was high, and my face was flushed.

Up on the screen above the bar, the camera found the man I was looking for: Adam Barnstead,

PhD. Brilliant writer. Gifted scholar. Consummate liar. Total asshole. And finalist for today’s prize.

An esteemed professor of literature and my former mentor. My former lover.

Everything in my life seemed to keep drawing me back into his destructive orbit like a comet

around a black hole. His gravity well was too deep, and my inertia was too weak to escape. Even

watching him now felt like a personal failure of will. Like an aching, open wound or a burst blister,

seeing him caused me physical pain. All these years later and my heart was still raw and bleeding

over Adam.

If he wins Poet Laureate while I’m working as a glorified janitor, I’m going to fucking scream.

As I watched, the announcer smiled and congratulated all the finalists. He extended his handshake

and the award, however, to an older woman with graying hair. She beamed and cried as she accepted,

fanning her hands elatedly like she’d just won an Oscar. I could hardly believe my eyes. Another

writer had just won the position Adam coveted. He lost. The bastard lost. Today was Adam’s turn to

stand on the sidelines while his hopes and dreams burned up and compressed into a singularity of

empty nothingness. His turn to feel his pride get ripped in two. It was clear from his face that he’d

been sure he would win.

Adam’s almost-handsome and ever-smiling face turned shocked. Then anxious, confused, and

ashen. Then, at last, utterly blank. Although his smile returned after a beat, it now looked painted on.

Mine, however, had never been more genuine. He would have to start his new job at the University of

Texas without this feather in his cap.

His expression made me remember when he made me feel like that: small and insignificant, weak,

and fragile. Stretched so thin by shame, failure, and mortification that I might tear apart. Adam ran his

hands through the salt-and-pepper chestnut hair at his temples and looked, for once, his age: forty-

three.

Behind his horn rim glasses, his eyes were focused murderously on the winner as disappointment

gave way to something more malignant. Dark, envious energy glittered in his hazel eyes. In answer,

pure schadenfreude suffused through me like a drug, electrifying every synapse with vicarious,

uncharitable pleasure. There wasn't a thing he could do.

He deserved to lose. In fact, he deserved to lose everything. At least this was a decent start.

I'd been a *freshman* in college when he used me. Just nineteen years old. I thought I'd been in

love with him, and he said he was in love with me. I was really just a toy. Another pretty coed who

was too naïve, too proud, and too dumb to listen when a grad student tried to tell me what Adam

really was. Like a fool, I'd told her she was just jealous.

My humiliation was a distant and unimportant memory as I watched Adam squirm on the podium.

While I was basking in the glow of heartfelt revenge, I heard the door behind me swing open.

What started as a slight turn of my head became a fully-fledged three-hundred-and-sixty-degree

rotation of my body when I realized who had just walked in the door. My battered little heart did a

somersault.

Ward Williams. Kate's brother. I knew this was coming— *he owned this bar*—but I was still

unprepared. He hadn't noticed me yet. I prayed it would stay that way for a while longer. I hadn't

seen him since our one-night stand several years back, and still felt awkward and ashamed about the

whole thing. I'd known what I was getting myself into, but I'd still cried the next day when I woke up

and he was gone.

I wished it had never happened. The night I spent with Ward was the night I'd learned that I

wasn't the type of girl who could do 'no strings.' It might work for some girls, but it just made me feel

empty and unwanted, especially after the earth-shattering sex we'd had. I hated feeling like I was

disposable. I'd promised Kate I could handle seeing Ward again, but now that I was seeing him, I

wasn't so sure.

Kate had told me all about Ward's early retirement from the NFL and the collapse of his

relationship with his fiancé. She told me that these days he drifted from hookup to hookup, never

dating or getting attached. Just for a second, I fantasized he was going to walk right over to me and

strike up a conversation and things would pick up right where they left off.

Ward joined a group of guys at a table to my left, poured himself a beer from their pitcher and

settled in with fist bumps and friendly teasing. I didn’t even attempt not to stare. He was attracting my

focus like a sailor looking for a lighthouse in a hurricane, even though I had been so intensely

interested in the Poet Laureate ceremony a moment before.

He deserved to be stared at.

Those deep blue eyes finally flicked my way a moment later. I suddenly became extremely

interested in the patch of floor I was mopping. I pretended not to notice that he elbowed one of his

friends and inclined his head in my direction. Whatever the question was, the other men at the table

shook their heads. I struggled to avoid tripping over my own two feet. Ward was watching me. They

all were.

Ward continued to stare at me as I mopped, long after his friends had lost interest. He was

drinking me in above the rim of his beer, and I felt a hot blush creep across my face. I stole furtive

glances at him, and in between, I could almost feel the weight of his gaze on my body as I moved.

Was he drawn to me like I was to him? Did I make his pulse race? Did I make his breath burn?

Why does this guy who I haven't seen in years command my attention?

The frustration reminded me of the spectacle of revenge I now sought to enjoy.

I glanced back at the television and Adam still looked miserable on the live feed of the awards

ceremony. His face was still deliciously pained. I hardly got to relish it, however, because one of

Ward's buddies crossed the room, reached up over the bar and changed the channel to football.

I was sure he didn't realize I was the one who turned on the ceremony. I weighed my desire to

bask in my ex's misery with the possibility of coming into conflict with a customer.

"Excuse me," I said, forcing my voice to be as honey-sweet and friendly as I could when I wanted

to get back to watching Adam's misery as quickly as possible. "I was actually watching that."

The guy shrugged. "Really?"

I nodded seriously. "Yes."

"Well, can you watch it later on YouTube?" He seemed mystified by the idea that I might not want

to watch football.

I bit my lip and said nothing. I didn't need to get into an altercation with a customer, but I really

wanted to watch the ceremony. Ward arrived next to his friend a second later. He cast his glittering

sapphire eyes over me curiously. He was even better looking up close.

"Hello there, Emma," he drawled, grinning. "It's been ages. What have you been up to?"

He did remember me. Should I be flattered?

"I just got back from studying in Europe." The way he was looking at me made me feel feverish

and lightheaded. I looked at Ward's dumb friend who turned off my show. "Could you please turn the

channel back?"

Ignoring the issue at hand, Ward was smiling at me. "So, you haven't been avoiding me these past

few years?" His tone was teasing.

Of course, I've been avoiding you.

"Don't flatter yourself." I said with a nervous grin. I turned to his friend, "Could you change it

back to CSPAN, please?" I pointed up at the screen.

Ward looked up at it in fake-looking surprise and then down at me, shaking his head. "You can't

be serious. I didn’t know anyone actually watched that channel.” Ward looked over to his friend and

must have telepathically communicated with him, because the guy returned to his chair, leaving us

alone. Ward was wearing that teasing look that he’d worn at that Halloween party four years ago. I

got the feeling he was *trying* to get a rise out of me, to test me or mess with me. He must enjoy seeing

me blush and struggle to stick up for myself. I could only imagine that I was as red as a lobster now,

but I wasn’t going to let myself melt in front of him. Not this time.

What makes you think I’ll just give up on what I want? I didn’t say it. There was no point in

arguing with Ward. He was as stubborn as his sister. I simply smiled, leaned my mop against the

bucket, and climbed atop the bar to turn my program right back on. I wasn’t going to give Ward what

he wanted.

Behind the bar, Willie looked up from his newspaper and raised his eyebrows at me. I shrugged

and scrambled back down. Ward could stick his condescending attitude right up his hot, amazingly

toned butt. Willie frowned and returned his attention to the paper. A wise choice.

“Emma, sweetheart, please turn that back to the channel it was on. My friend wants to watch the

game.” Ward was now back at my elbow. His voice was a bit less teasing than it had been. All across

the room, patrons were beginning to tune into our little clash. Ward was now grinning from ear to ear.

He was definitely enjoying seeing me get flustered.

Sweetheart?

I forced my clenched teeth open to smile at him again. “Ward, *sweetheart,* I don’t really care for

football. I want to watch the poet laureate ceremony.” I affected an innocent face and played with the

end of my ponytail.

“Why the hell would you want to watch that? It sounds incredibly boring, even by CSPAN

standards.” He said ‘CSPAN’ like I might say ‘hardcore furry pornography’ or ‘the Miss America

swimsuit competition.’ I resisted the temptation to roll my eyes at him.

“What’s wrong with CSPAN?” I asked. My voice, unlike his, was reasonable and pleasant,

although slightly more tart than it had been. I just wanted to watch my program and was starting to

lose my patience. “I was watching it. *It’s educational*. No one else was paying any attention to it.

Why can’t you just go drink your beer with your buddies and let me work?” I truly didn’t understand

some men’s attachment to watching grown men in tight pants throwing themselves into one another’s

arms. For being such a popular pastime amongst straight men, it seemed like a deeply homoerotic

game. The players even swatted one another on the ass.

Ward didn’t answer my question. He simply reached up again and turned off my program.

“No one wants to watch anything *educational* in a bar but you,” he told me. His voice was light

and teasing. “Watching some football will do you good, anyway. Think of it this way, it’ll be

educational for you.” He paused. “Unless there’s an actual reason you want to watch CSPAN. Or are

you just being stubborn to mess with me?”

Don’t let him fool you. He’s the one messing with you, I reminded myself. *Don’t let him see you*

get annoyed. It’ll only encourage him. And don’t tell him why you want to watch it so badly.

I smiled and nodded, and then, once he walked off and sat down, I clambered up on a barstool to

hoist myself atop the bar. I tuned the channel back to CSPAN. I wasn’t even off the barstool before I

heard him clearing his throat directly behind me.

“Really?!” he asked loudly, right behind my ear.

I heard a sharp, unladylike squeak escape me. Surprise made me gasp and slip, and I turned and

nearly fell backwards off the barstool. Ward's strong hands shot out to grab me, gripping my

shoulders and under my knees and then setting me on my feet and pinning me to the bar before I could

regain my footing.

He'd caught me. Damn, he was fast.

We were now only inches apart. My heart thudded against my ribs. His lips parted in surprise,

and I remembered kissing them. My mind was a thousand miles away…

Ward was tall. At least a full foot taller than my five-one-and-three-quarter-inches. I had to look

up and up to see his eyes, which looked surprised, and then confused. We stared at one another for a

long, long moment.

Suddenly, he released my shoulders like I was on fire and stepped back. His face went blank as if

remembering something. I was too shocked to speak, so I just stared instead.

But it was his fault I'd fallen in the first place. Belatedly, I felt myself scowling. I drew myself up

to my full height—all five foot two inches—and glared.

"Come on, Emma. You've lost this round. Give it up," he ordered me before I recovered the

powers of speech. With his height, there was no need for him to climb up on a barstool precariously.

He just reached up around me and returned the channel to football. “Also, you really shouldn’t stand

on the barstools or the bar. They aren’t meant to be climbed on. Perhaps you’re used to dancing atop

bars, but this isn’t that kind of place.”

He let out a small chuckle and looked me up and down appreciatively.

“Excuse you?” I hissed. He might own the bar, but Kate managed it. I dropped the sugary tone

from my voice. He no longer deserved sweet Emma.

“Nobody here likes CSPAN.”

“I do. Please turn it back on.”

His eyebrows lifted in apparent amusement and he laughed at me while shaking his head. “Yeah, I

don’t think so.” Perhaps being so ridiculously sexy meant women just did whatever he ordered them

to do. Likely so. It was time someone knocked him down a peg. And these days, I was just the woman

to do it.

“Listen Ward, you need to—” I started.

At the same time, he said, “Last time I checked, this is still my bar.”

I made a dismissive, huffy little noise that silenced him—at least temporarily, because he

chuckled. It wasn’t exactly a dignified noise and his reaction seemed to indicate he found it cute

rather than intimidating, but I used the moment to explain,

“Your bar or not, I’m a human being who doesn’t appreciate being talked down to! I don’t put up

with jerks ordering me around for no reason and being condescending, sexist, and high-handed.”

He laughed. “I’m hardly a sexist because I want to watch football. By that logic, all men are

sexists.” He looked down at me like he was having the time of his life. He was definitely getting off

on this little spat, and it was infuriating me. Another part of me—a small but vocal part—was

enjoying his attention and our fight *way too much*. I shifted from foot to foot as my brain pinged

between anger and attraction. Anger won. Nobody calls me sweetheart.

“Not everyone likes football. There’s no reason I shouldn’t be able to mop in peace and have the

TV tuned to something that isn’t boring sports.”

“Boring?!” He looked horrified. You’d have thought I’d just personally insulted him or

blasphemed against the lord himself.

“Boring?!” I repeated Ward’s previous words, complete with a rude exaggeration of his slight

southern accent.

My impression only made him laugh. When he spoke, he was still grinning, "*Woman, you are in a*

bar. My bar. TVs in bars play sports. What the hell is going on here?" he asked the air around him

rhetorically. "Is this the twilight zone?" Clearly, he was not used to being challenged.

Willie pulled his newspaper up higher around his face, insulating himself from the conversation

despite being only two feet away. I thought I could hear him sniggering behind it. Coward.

"Is it really so surreal for you that someone might stand up to you? You're a walking stereotype." I

shook my head at him.

He smirked. "Says you. I bet you live entirely off a diet of quinoa, kale smoothies, and smug

superiority."

I happen to like quinoa and kale smoothies.

"While I suppose you like to spend your time drooling in front of the latest Sharknado sequel

when you aren't reliving your glory days on tape. I've seen your silly truck, too. Are you

compensating for anything?" A couple of his buddies laughed.

He leaned in close to whisper in my ear, "You know there's absolutely nothing I need to

compensate for, now don’t you, Emma?” When I felt my blush burning my cheeks, his smile was

knowing. His voice was soft and amused when he added, “You have no idea what’s going on here

right now, do you?” His utter confidence was sexy as hell. It was also obnoxious as hell. Being turned

on *and* angry wasn’t something that I was used to.

“Clearly, we need Kate to come and talk some sense into you. I’m going to go get her.”

He nodded and sunk down on a barstool. A frustrating smile was still on his face. “Yeah, you do

that, Tinkerbell.”

Tinkerbell? ! I stormed off toward the office, practically quivering with anger, attraction,

confusion, and embarrassment. I was so stuffed full of emotion I worried I was going to

spontaneously combust, and I definitely didn’t want Ward to see it.

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Document Outline

- Title Page
- Copyright
- Contents
- About This Book
- 1. Ariel
- 2. Ariel
- 3. Derek
- 4. Ariel
- 5. Derek
- 6. Ariel
- 7. Ariel
- 8. Derek
- 9. Ariel
- 10. Derek
- 11. Ariel
- 12. Derek
- 13. Derek
- 14. Ariel
- 15. Derek
- 16. Ariel
- 17. Derek
- 18. Derek
- 19. Ariel
- 20. Derek
- 21. Derek
- 22. Derek
- 23. Ariel
- 24. Ariel
- 25. Ariel
- 26. Derek
- 27. Derek
- 28. Ariel
- 29. Derek

- 30. Derek
- 31. Ariel
- 32. Derek
- 33. Ariel
- 34. Derek
- 35. Ariel
- 36. Ariel
- 37. Derek
- 38. Ariel
- 39. Derek
- 40. Derek
- 41. Derek
- 42. Derek
- 43. Derek
- 44. Ariel
- 45. Derek
- 46. Derek
- 47. Derek
- 48. Ariel
- 49. Ariel
- 50. Derek
- 51. Ariel
- Epilogue
- Let Down Your Hair
- Admit You Want Me
- How to get your FREE extended epilogues!
- Also by Taylor Holloway

Table of Contents

About This Book
Ariel
Derek
Epilogue
Let Down Your Hair
Admit You Want Me
How to get your FREE extended epilogues!
Also by Taylor Holloway
Title Page
Copyright
Contents
2. Ariel
4. Ariel
5. Derek
6. Ariel
7. Ariel
8. Derek
9. Ariel
10. Derek
11. Ariel
12. Derek
13. Derek
14. Ariel
15. Derek
16. Ariel
17. Derek
18. Derek
19. Ariel
20. Derek
21. Derek
22. Derek
23. Ariel
24. Ariel
25. Ariel

26. Derek
27. Derek
28. Ariel
29. Derek
30. Derek
31. Ariel
32. Derek
33. Ariel
34. Derek
35. Ariel
36. Ariel
37. Derek
38. Ariel
39. Derek
40. Derek
41. Derek